OSPREY COMBAT AIRCRAFT • 75

JUNKERS JU 88 *KAMPFGESCHWADER* IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

John Weal

Osprey's primary Luftwaffe author/artist, JOHN WEAL has written and/or illustrated more than 25 titles in the Aircraft of the Aces, Combat Aircraft and Aviation Elite Units series since 1994. Possessing one of the largest private collections of original German-language literature from World War 2, his research is firmly based on this huge archive. Fluent in German, Weal has also spent much time establishing contact with ex-members of the Luftwaffe, from General Staff Officers of the RLM to frontline aircrew. He has often used these private sources to gain access to further archival material, including complete Luftwaffe orders of battle for the various fighting fronts and individual combat reports. A freelance airbrush artist since the days of the monthly *RAF Flying Review*, and its various successors, Weal also helps his German wife run a small technical translation and interpreting agency.

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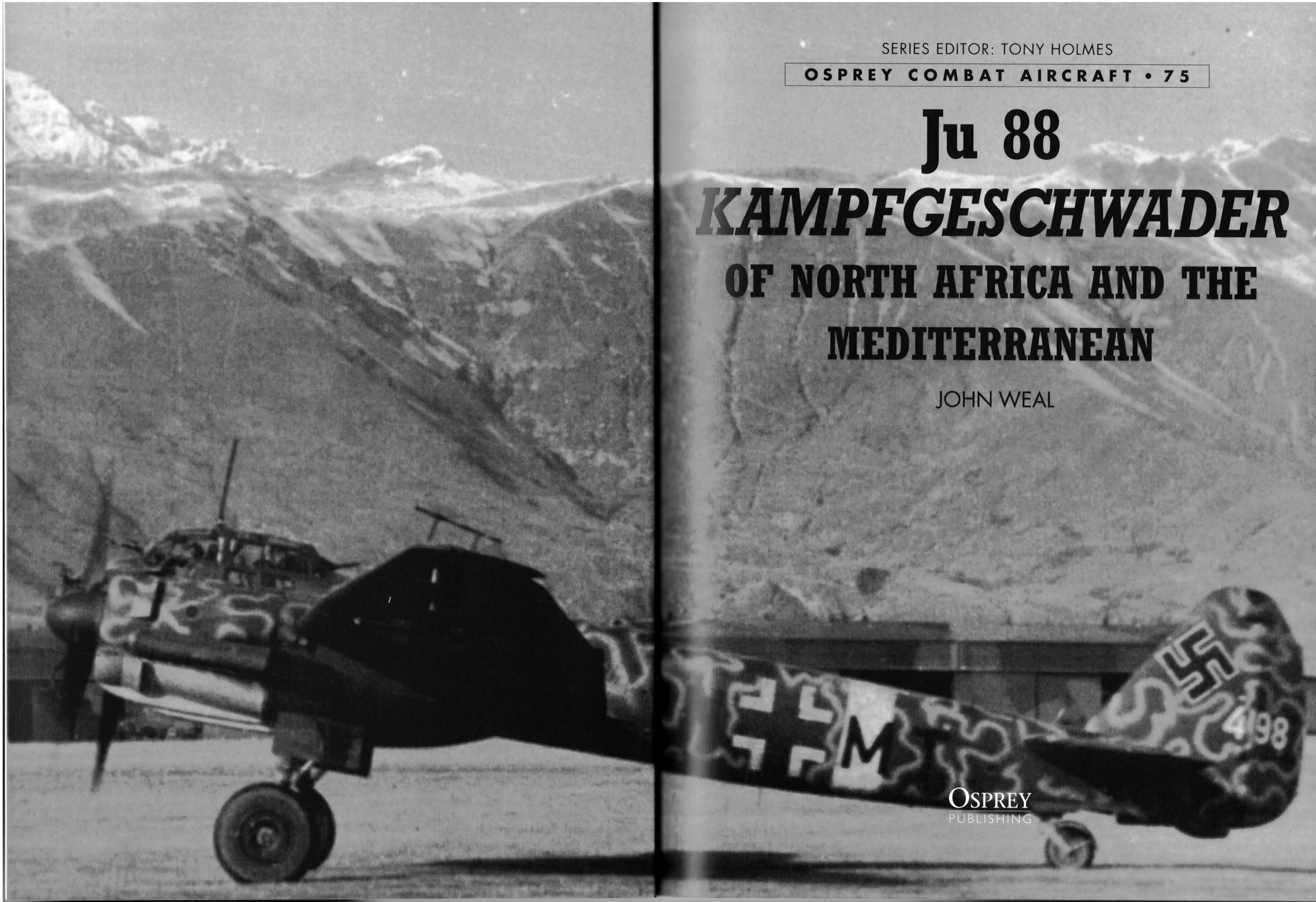

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JOHN WEAL

OSPREY
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Front cover

The most famous Luftwaffe fighter pilot in North Africa was undoubtedly Hans-Joachim Marseille of *Jagdgeschwader* 27. His name is still familiar to enthusiasts today. But his counterpart in the bomber arm, one Joachim Helbig, is now all but forgotten. 'Jochen' Helbig, as he was universally known, was a somewhat unwilling recruit to the Luftwaffe when he was transferred from his first love, the artillery, to the fledgling air arm of the Third Reich in 1936. Despite this initial reluctance, however, he rose to prominence in his new role, beginning the war as an oberleutnant and observer with *Lehrgeschwader* (LG) 1 and subsequently rising to the rank of oberst and becoming *Geschwaderkommodore* of the unit.

And just as Marseille is associated with Bf 109s bearing the numeral 'Yellow 14', so Helbig, after being appointed *Staffelkapitän* of 4./LG 1 in the spring of 1940, always preferred to fly a Ju 88A coded 'L1+AM'. Even more remarkably, he apparently retained not just the same markings but the same aircraft too. According to some sources, Helbig's 'Anton-Marie' was the only Ju 88 in the Luftwaffe to complete over 1000 flying hours – some 750 of them on operations.

The partnership between man and machine that had lasted for over three years finally came to an end when 'L1+AM' fell victim to a US heavy bomber raid on Pordenone airfield in northern Italy. In Helbig's own words, 'She was only a machine, but to her pilot, her loyal crew and her inconsolable chief mechanic she had become a living, breathing something . . . and now she was taking her leave of us'.

Wiek Luijken's striking cover painting, reconstructing one of the many camouflage schemes 'Anton-Marie' wore during its long career, neatly encapsulates two of the aircraft's roles in the Mediterranean theatre as it takes time out from supporting the *Akrika Korps* in the Western Desert to attack an Allied convoy at sea (*Cover artwork by Wiek Luijken*)

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BATTLE IS JOINED

First flown in prototype form on 21 December 1936, Junkers' twin-engined Ju 88 was subsequently to evolve into what was arguably the most versatile machine to serve with the Luftwaffe in World War 2. And nowhere was that versatility more graphically demonstrated than in the Mediterranean theatre, where the Ju 88 – initially designed and classified as a *Schnellbomber*, or high-speed bomber – operated as a dive-bomber, medium-altitude level bomber, torpedo-bomber, heavy fighter, nightfighter, reconnaissance aircraft, convoy escort and maritime patrol fighter, courier aircraft and emergency transport.

The Luftwaffe's involvement in the air war in the Mediterranean came about as a direct result of Italy's declaring war on France and Great Britain on 10 June 1940. With the *Blitzkrieg* in the west by then at its height and France already on the point of collapse, the Italian *Duce*, Benito Mussolini, saw this as a golden opportunity to share in the spoils of victory with German co-dictator Adolf Hitler. Instead, Italian forces soon found themselves in dire trouble. At sea, the Royal Navy engaged Italian vessels, inflicting a succession of defeats and giving the lie to Mussolini's proud boast that the Mediterranean was *mare nostrum* – 'our sea'. In North Africa, the Italian army invaded Egypt, only to be driven back halfway across Libya and all but destroyed by British and Commonwealth troops.

Unable to ignore the growing instability on his southern flank, Hitler ordered that Luftwaffe units be sent to the area to restore the situation. The command selected to make the transfer was *General der Flieger* Hans Geisler's *X. Fliegerkorps*, then stationed in Norway. And to provide the *Korps* with the necessary striking power, two *Gruppen* each of Ju 87s and Ju 88s were added to its order of battle. For the Stukas, the move south would give them the chance to regain something of the fearsome reputation they had lost after being trounced by the RAF in the Battle of Britain. The Ju 88 had no need to prove anything. By late 1940 it had already firmly established itself as the best bomber in the Luftwaffe's armoury.

The two most famous Luftwaffe units, one fighter and one bomber, that dominated much of the air war in North Africa and the Mediterranean were JG 26 and LG 1. Here, a representative from each *Geschwader* – a Bf 109F-4/trop of 6./JG 27 and a Ju 88A-4 of 12./LG 1 – stand cheek by jowl at Martuba, in Libya, during the spring of 1942

The two Ju 88 *Gruppen* involved in the initial transfer both came from the same parent *Geschwader*, *Lehrgeschwader* 1. One of only two such units established by the Luftwaffe (a third had been planned but never reached full strength), the *Lehrgeschwader* were unique in that they were created as operational training and evaluation wings, with each of their component *Gruppen* being equipped with a different type of aircraft. *Lehrgeschwader* 1, for example, which was first activated in 1936, ultimately comprised five *Gruppen* – two flying bombers, one flying fighters, another operating *Zerstörer* and the fifth equipped with dive-bombers. It was the task of these disparate *Gruppen* to develop and refine the combat tactics to be used by the many new aircraft entering Luftwaffe service in the run-up to World War 2.

One of LG 1's early arrivals in the Mediterranean theatre runs up its engines prior to take-off. A single heavy bomb is just visible beneath each wing centre-section. Note too the small fairing immediately behind the nose glazing (beneath the windscreen gun), indicating that this is a Ju 88A-6, which had presumably been fitted with a balloon-cable fender and cutter during the recent night Blitz over Britain

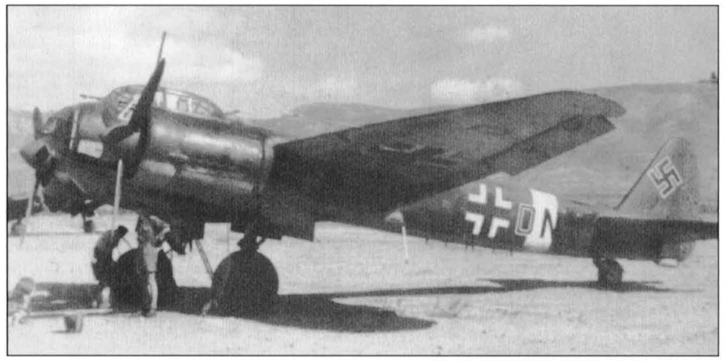
With the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939 their work was effectively done. By the time of the Battle of Britain, three of LG 1's *Gruppen* had therefore been re-equipped with Ju 88s, and this part of the unit was, to all intents and purposes, operating as a standard *Kampfgeschwader* (the two remaining *Gruppen* would later be redesignated and incorporated into the nightfighter and dive-bomber arms). And it was in late 1940, just as the night Blitz on Britain was intensifying, that II. and III./LG 1 were suddenly withdrawn from *Luftflotte* 3 in western France and ordered to the Mediterranean. Departing their bases at Orléans-Bricy and Châteaudun, respectively, they were to stage, via Lechfeld, in Germany, down the length of Italy to Catania, on the island of Sicily.

Although they did not know it at the time, their sojourn in the south was to be a lengthy one. In fact, LG 1 would not return to *Luftflotte* 3 in northwest Europe until recalled to combat the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. In the intervening three-a-half years, LG 1 forged for itself a name as *the* Mediterranean *Kampfgeschwader*. It became that theatre's bomber equivalent of the famed *Jagdgeschwader* 27 *'Afrika'*. And just as JG 27 had its Hans-Joachim Marseille, so too did LG 1 produce one outstanding personality.

Staffelkapitän of 4./LG 1 at the time of the transfer to Sicily, and already a holder of the Knight's Cross in recognition of his operations over Poland, Norway, France and Great Britain, Hauptmann Joachim 'Jochen' Helbig would subsequently become *Geschwaderkommodore* of LG 1. He was also one of the few Luftwaffe bomber pilots whose name would be familiar to both friend and foe alike. Before it finally left the Mediterranean in mid-1944, the unit he commanded, while still officially *Lehrgeschwader* 1, was being more commonly referred to by both sides as the 'Helbig Flyers'.

Hauptmann Joachim Helbig (right) and his crew pictured in the cockpit of their trusty 'AM'. This photograph was taken sometime after 30 August 1941, when Oberfeldwebel Franz Schlund – seen at the rear – became the Luftwaffe's first wireless-operator/air gunner to be awarded the Knight's Cross

The British were fully aware of *X. Fliegerkorps'* initial migration southwards, the RAF's wireless interception service reporting the first four Ju 88s of LG 1 as having arrived at Catania, on the eastern coast of Sicily, by the evening of 26 December 1940. The Luftwaffe's



Sitting in the midday sun at Catania, 5./LG 1's 'DN' is checked over prior to departing on its next mission. Although the white aft fuselage band of the Mediterranean area is clearly in evidence, there is no corresponding white tip outboard of that small underwing individual aircraft letter 'D'. There is every likelihood that this is the 'L1+DN' that was lost in action on 21 March 1941 attacking Allied convoy AN-21, carrying Commonwealth troops from Alexandria to Greece

movements continued to be closely monitored in the weeks that followed, and by mid-January 1941, signals intelligence had not only established that 49 Ju 88s of *Stab*, II. and III./LG 1 were concentrated at Catania, they had even pinpointed a number of stragglers, beset by mechanical problems, strung out on fields down the leg of Italy, including one at Reggio nell' Emilia, two at Pisa, and another at Naples.

General der Flieger Geisler set up his *Korps* HQ in the Hotel Domenico at Taormina, a holiday resort some 30 miles up the coast from Catania.

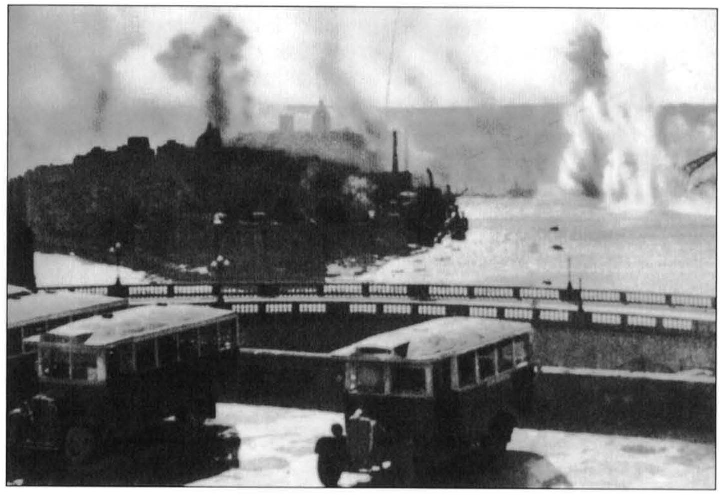
Given its relatively limited numbers, the list of operational tasks that *X. Fliegerkorps* was expected to carry out was daunting, to say the least. Firstly, it was to close the central Mediterranean (i.e. the Sicilian Narrows) to the passage of Allied convoys between Gibraltar and Alexandria, thereby starving the island of Malta of essential supplies. Secondly, it was to disrupt the lines of supply of Gen Wavell's Desert Army by mining the Suez Canal (a job for the *Korps'* He 111s). Thirdly, it was to support Italian land forces in Libya in order to halt the further advance of British and Commonwealth troops, and thus retain hold of Tripoli, the intended port of disembarkation for Rommel's *Afrika Korps*. And fourthly, it was to secure the Axis convoy routes transporting supplies across the Mediterranean from Italy to North Africa.

INTO ACTION

Lehrgeschwader 1's operational debut in the Mediterranean was low-key and far from successful. On the afternoon of 10 January three Ju 88s were sent out against the Royal Navy carrier HMS *Illustrious*, which was limping towards Malta after being severely damaged by Ju 87s. But the trio was intercepted and driven off by Hurricanes, which forced them to jettison their bombs and turn tail for home. A second raid by several more III. *Gruppe* machines shortly afterwards proved equally fruitless.

Worse was to come. Two days later III./LG 1 were on the receiving end. After first taking the precaution of despatching a reconnaissance machine to overfly Catania – which was meant to persuade the Germans that their presence on the field had been detected from the air, and thus disguise the fact that their approach and arrival had, in reality, been closely monitored by radio intercepts – the RAF mounted a night raid by Malta-based Wellingtons. Five Axis aircraft were destroyed on the ground, including two of III. *Gruppe's* Ju 88s.

It was 15 January before the bulk of II./LG 1 reached Catania. That same evening 16 of their number took off again to attack *Illustrious*, which had by now reached the dubious safety of Malta's Grand Harbour. The Ju 88s bombed through cloud and registered no hits. At the same time the Wellingtons were back over Catania, where they destroyed four aircraft and inflicted the first casualties to be suffered by LG 1 in-theatre. One of the two killed was Leutnant Horst Nagel, a 6. *Staffel* pilot whose Ju 88 had been declared unserviceable and who was on temporary duty in the ops room. The *Geschwader* also reported eight wounded.



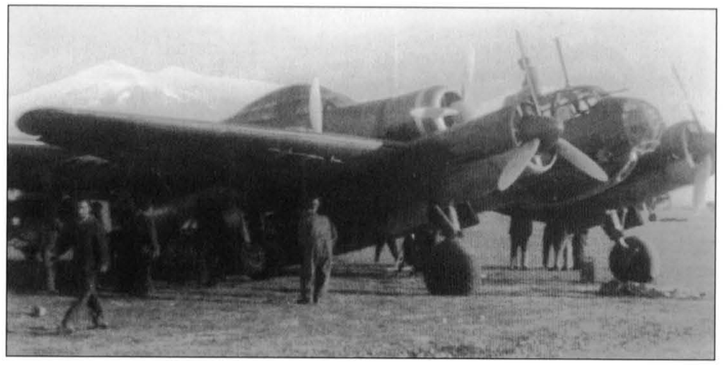
The Royal Navy carrier HMS *Illustrious* is hidden by fountains of water thrown up by near misses (right) close to its berth at the entrance to French Creek in Malta's Grand Harbour

The following day witnessed *X. Fliegerkorps'* first major raid on Malta. The target was again *Illustrious*, and among the attacking force were 17 Ju 88s from II. and III./LG 1. Due to poor weather conditions, the Bf 110 escorts failed to make the rendezvous so the Ju 88s pressed on alone. Two of their bombs exploded in the water between the carrier's hull and the harbour wall at the entrance to French Creek against which it was moored, causing the vessel further damage.

A number of claims were made by the island's defending fighters and anti-aircraft gunners, but only one Ju 88 was in fact lost. This was 9. *Staffel's* 'L1+CT', which was engaged by a Fleet Air Arm Fulmar and went down into the sea, taking Oberleutnant Kurt Pichler and his crew with it. Three others crash-landed back at Catania due to combat damage, and a fourth, piloted by Oberleutnant Theodor Hagen, just reached Sicily before making an emergency landing on the beach of Pozzallo. In addition, the *Geschwader* was to lose two more Ju 88s before the day was out, written off on the ground when an Italian aircraft collided with them.

Forty-eight hours later, III. *Gruppe* reported another crew missing when Leutnant Horst Dunkel was forced to ditch 'L1+ER' after being attacked by Hurricanes during a raid on Malta's Hal Far airfield.

The next day, 19 January, the *Geschwader* turned its attention back to *Illustrious*. Although the island's defences claimed eight of the 30 attacking Junkers destroyed, only two machines – both from 8. *Staffel*, one being that of the *Staffelkapitän*, Hauptmann Wilhelm Dürbeck – failed to return. Dürbeck's 'L1+AS' is listed by one source as having fallen victim to a Hurricane, but Feldwebel Herbert Isachsen, the pilot of the aircraft following him down in the dive on the carrier, described after his return to Catania how he saw the *Staffelkapitän's* machine hit by flak and break apart in the air. A third Ju 88 chased out to sea with an engine on fire by a Hurricane was almost certainly the aircraft of III. *Gruppe's Stabskette* that was destroyed when it too forced-landed near Pozallo.



It was not only in the skies over Malta that LG 1's machines were at risk. Here at Catania, one of the unit's Ju 88A-5s has been rammed by an Italian Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 bomber. The caption to the original print – on which Mount Etna may just be seen in the left background – reads simply 'A difference of opinion!'

This stretch along the southeastern coast of Sicily, the nearest piece of friendly territory for any badly damaged machine struggling to make it back from Malta, was soon to acquire a reputation as something of an aircraft graveyard!

Bad weather over Sicily on 20 January kept the resident Luftwaffe units' activities to a minimum during the day, but did not prevent Malta's Wellingtons from again

Here, the pilot of Ju 88A-5 'White N' (from either 4. or 7./LG 1) has managed to pull off a successful belly landing back on Sicily after being attacked by RAF fighters over Malta – note the chewed-up fin and rudder . . .

bombing Catania after darkness had fallen. The next evening, therefore, the Ju 88s made the short hop across the Straits of Messina to Reggio di Calabria, on the toe of the Italian mainland, in order to escape further attack. These overnight deployments to Reggio would become a regular feature in the weeks ahead.

By 23 January *Illustrious* had been sufficiently patched up to allow it to slip undetected out of Malta. When a reconnaissance machine reported the vessel's absence, III./LG 1 despatched 11 Junkers to find it. Heavy cloud and frequent rain squalls out to sea hampered their efforts. Eight aircraft returned to Catania after an hour's fruitless search, having experienced strong interference with their radio and navigational equipment. But three Ju 88s of 8. *Staffel*, led by Leutnant Hermann Böhmer, remained unaccounted for.

It later transpired that all three had run out of fuel in thick cloud to the south of Italy. Although unsure of their position, Böhmer had given the order to bail out. Of the 12 crewmen, only Feldwebel Isachsen – the pilot who had witnessed the demise of his *Staffelkapitän* over Grand Harbour four days earlier – came down on land and survived to tell the tale. Five bodies were subsequently washed ashore along the coast of southern Italy, and a sixth was found weeks later on a beach in Albania, 150 miles away.

Illustrious and its four attendant destroyers were sighted twice by reconnaissance aircraft on 24 January, and 31 Ju 88s of II. and III./LG 1 were ordered off from Catania. It is not certain whether the bombers found the carrier on this occasion, let alone attacked it, but 9. *Staffel* did, somewhat inexplicably, report damaging two cruisers. Running low on fuel, some bombers put down at Benina, in Libya, where they stayed overnight. Others set course for the long, two-hour haul back to Sicily;

'The automatic flight control system was switched back on and the pilot took his feet off the pedals. As always during the homeward flight, the tension eased. We chatted, sucked sweets and chocolate, or stuffed biscuits into each others' mouths.'

. . . but not everyone was so lucky. In this fortunately rather blurred print, a crewman lies dead among the blazing wreckage of his unidentified Ju 88 'somewhere on Malta'

Two Junkers were damaged in crash landings upon their return to Catania. Some aircraft of LG 1 were clearly also in action over Malta on this same 24 January, with 4. *Staffel* reporting one of its machines missing after an attack on Hal Far airfield. 'L1+HM' was downed by the meteorological Gladiator that it chanced upon while approaching the target and, perhaps rather unwisely, fired at in passing, for the biplane promptly forsook its weather duties and chased the Ju 88 down into the dive and then out to sea 'yapping at its heels like a terrier.'

The following day *Illustrious* reached Alexandria. From there the vessel would make its way, via the Suez Canal, to the east coast of America, where it was to undergo major repairs. Although these would keep the carrier out of the war for a full year, the bombers of *X. Fliegerkorps* had thus failed to accomplish the first task they had been given in the Mediterranean – namely, to send the 23,000-ton carrier to the bottom.

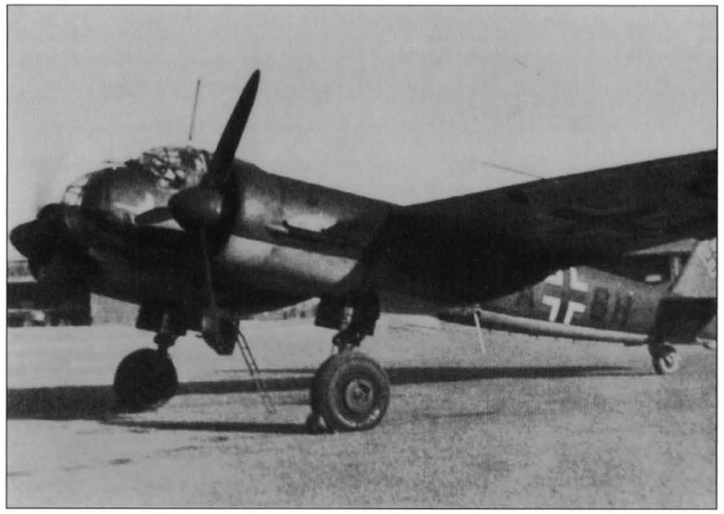
But there were plenty of other objectives to keep the Ju 88s occupied in their new theatre of operations, not least the island of Malta itself, which sat foursquare astride the direct sea route between Italy and Tripoli, the seaport capital of Libya. The island fortress was rightly described at the time as an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier on Mussolini's doorstep'. Its neutralisation as an air and sea base was therefore a matter of prime importance if the lines of supply to Axis troops in North Africa were to be kept open. And Ju 88 crews would find themselves returning to it time and time again in the weeks and months to come.

Nor was it just the bombers that had to brave Malta's defences. A close watch needed to be kept on Allied shipping movements and other activities on and around the island. And very soon the Ju 88s of *X. Fliegerkorps'* sole long-range reconnaissance *Staffel*, 1.(F)/121, which were based alongside LG 1 at Catania, were also discovering just how dangerous the skies above Malta could be. One of the unit's earliest casualties was Leutnant Helmut Fund's '7A+DH', reported missing on 26 January after coming under attack from two of the island's Hurricanes.

During the closing week of January and the first half of February 1941 the two *Gruppen* of LG 1 continued to attack Malta. They usually timed their raids to come in around dusk, or later, in order to minimise the risk from enemy fighters. They nonetheless had six Ju 88s either damaged or written-off during this period, most of them in crash-landings at Catania.

It was at this juncture too that LG 1's Ju 88s began to venture further a field. At dawn on 9 February units of Force 'H' (the Royal Navy's Western Mediterranean Fleet) comprising the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, the battleship *Malaya* and battlecruiser *Renown*, accompanied by the cruiser *Sheffield* and ten destroyers, carried out a surprise air and sea bombardment of the Italian ports of Genoa, Spezia and Leghorn.

The white bird emblem (variously described as a swan or a wild goose) visible on the nose of this early reconnaissance Ju 88D identifies it as a machine of 1.(F)/121. This is corroborated by the fuselage code, '7A+GH', although the total lack of white theatre markings may indicate that this photograph was taken prior to, or during *X. Fliegerkorps'* move from Norway to Sicily



Although some 40 of LG 1's bombers had been over Malta only hours earlier, 21 machines, led by Hauptmann Gerhard Kollewe, the *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./LG 1, were ordered to find and attack the British vessels as they headed back to Gibraltar. They were reported to be somewhere in the 110-mile stretch of water between the northeastern tip of Corsica and the coast of southern France. But once again the weather intervened. Heavy clouds prevented Kollewe's crews from sighting the enemy, and all they got for their pains were some inaccurate bursts of fire from nervous Italian anti-aircraft gunners as they passed close to the island of Sardinia, and an escort of suspicious *Regia Aeronautica* fighters, which shadowed them until they were safely out of range.

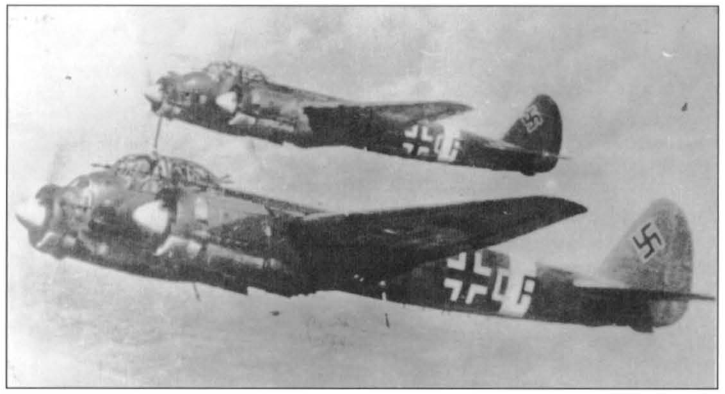
This foray to the northern reaches of the Mediterranean was something of a one-off, however. During the latter half of February the main focus of military activity in the area – and therefore of LG 1's operations – was to shift southwards to the shores of Africa. There, British forces had captured Benghazi from the Italians on 6 February and advanced towards El Agheila, on the Gulf of Sirte. Tripoli itself would soon be coming under threat. But on 11 February the first ships carrying troops of the *Afrika Korps* docked in the Libyan capital. On that same date aircraft of LG 1 were despatched on an armed reconnaissance sweep along the North African coast. They flew east as far as Mersa Matruh, in Egypt, but failed to spot any shipping.

On the following day, which was marked by General Rommel's arrival in Africa, 18 Ju 88s of II. and III./LG 1 attacked British troops and encampments along the coastal highway between Benghazi and El Agheila. They suffered a single loss when 6. *Staffel's* 'L1+IP' was downed by anti-aircraft fire southwest of Soluch. Although the pilot and air-gunner survived the crash-landing, the latter was killed by a marauding band of armed Arabs two nights later as the pair tried to reach the Italian lines.

Even as the 18 Ju 88s were searching for targets along Libya's Via Balbia, another six were escorting a troop convoy across the Mediterranean, and three more were raiding Malta. This division of labour was indicative of LG 1's priorities in the immediate weeks ahead. Malta would be temporarily relegated to third place while the *Geschwader's* Ju 88s first concentrated their efforts on shepherding convoys to Libya in order to build up the strength of the *Afrika Korps*, and then in supporting Rommel's troops in the field, or rather the desert, as they set out to push British and Commonwealth forces back from whence they came – to the Egyptian border and beyond.

ATTACKING BENGHAZI

The first major target of the North African campaign for LG 1 was the port of Benghazi. Captured by the British just a week earlier, the enemy were already using it to bring in supplies and reinforcements to strengthen their positions around El Agheila. The *Geschwader's* Ju 88s took off from Catania to bomb the harbour on a regular, almost daily basis. During one such raid by 15 machines of III. *Gruppe* early on the morning of 15 February, flak damaged one of the attackers. Rather than attempting to make it back to Sicily on just one engine, the pilot decided instead to crash-land in the desert outside Tripoli. It was a lucky escape for future Swords winner Oberleutnant Hermann Hogeback. Another crew were not so fortunate.



Tucked in close together, a pair of 6./LG 1 machines – 'L1+DP' in the foreground and 'L1+CP' to the rear – climb hard away from Sicily as they set out on another mission

Intercepted and chased out to sea by a Hurricane, 7. *Staffel's* 'L1+LR' was forced to ditch. All four crewmen were picked up by a British vessel after spending more than eight hours in their dinghy, but one subsequently died of his wounds in a Benghazi hospital.

Despite losses such as these, not everyone was impressed by the strength of Benghazi's defences. After another early morning raid two days later, one *Geschwader* member noted somewhat facetiously in his logbook, 'The "Tommies" have been out shopping and bought themselves three searchlights'.

On 18 February, during a raid on a small convoy that had just put in to Benghazi harbour, the crews of III./LG 1 reported the presence there of two British cruisers. In fact, the ships were the anti-aircraft cruiser *Coventry* and the 7200-ton monitor *Terror*. The latter, a shallow-draught vessel mounting two enormous high-angled 15-inch guns and eight smaller 4-inch weapons, had kept pace with the advance of Gen Wavell's troops along the coast road out of Egypt, harassing the retreating Italians all the way with a succession of devastating inshore bombardments.

Having helped to drive Italian forces back over the Egyptian border, *Terror's* guns had then cut off their line of withdrawal by blasting away a 150-yard stretch of the escarpment leading up to the infamous Halfaya Pass (inevitably 'Hellfire Pass' to the British), which was the only major route up on to the Libyan plateau. They next poured nearly 600 tons of high-explosive shells into Bardia, the first Italian stronghold just 12 miles inside Libya, before adding their weight to the naval bombardment of Tobruk, a further 75 miles along the coast.

Mindful of the havoc *Terror* could wreak on the *Afrika Korps* as Rommel's troops prepared to launch their push back along the coastal highway to regain the territory lost in the recent Italian retreat, the order was given to sink the elderly monitor. Thus, on the afternoon of 19 February, while the bulk of III./LG 1 was attacking a convoy some 30 miles off Benghazi, five Ju 88s were despatched to dive-bomb *Terror*, still berthed in Benghazi harbour. Greeted by a ferocious barrage of anti-aircraft fire, and harried by a single Hurricane, none of the Ju 88s succeeded in hitting the vessel. They came closer during a morning raid three days later, however, when two near misses caused considerable damage to *Terror's* hull plates.

The monitor began to take on water, and when the vessel was subjected to yet another attack that same evening, this time by machines of II. *Gruppe*, it was decided that Benghazi was becoming too hot for the warship, and that it should retire east along the coast out of harm's way. But just under 24 hours later, at 1822 hrs on 23 February, *Terror* was caught off Derna by two Ju 88s of III./LG 1 engaged on an anti-shipping sweep. Two bombs exploded in the water close alongside level with her bridge. Her hull split open, it took on a heavy list and slowly sank beneath the waves. The World War 1 monitor would not be the last warship of the Royal Navy to fall victim to Ju 88s in the Mediterranean. Indeed, just 24 hours were to pass before the next one followed it to the bottom.

The sinking of *Terror* had removed at least one threat to the *Afrika Korps* as it began its drive eastwards. Rommel's troops had initially encountered British forces near El Agheila on 20 February, and the first armed clash between the two sides occurred four days later. For the next few weeks the Ju 88s of LG 1 would divide their time between shepherding convoys across the Mediterranean in order to ensure a steady flow of supplies to the troops in North Africa, and in providing direct support to those troops as they began to push the British back towards Egypt.

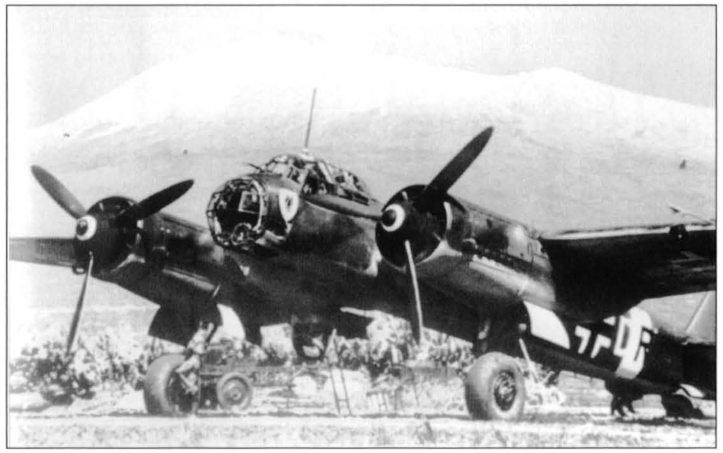
Many of LG 1's early Mediterranean missions were flown in penny-packet numbers, but not always in such neat arrowhead formation as displayed here – especially if RAF or FAA fighters were about!

FIRST ATTACK ON TOBRUK

In the early hours of 23 February, three machines of II./LG 1 had lifted off from Catania to carry out their first bombing raid on Tobruk. Situated less than 90 miles from the Egyptian frontier, this small harbour town had been captured by British forces a month earlier, and its defences had since been significantly strengthened. They certainly consisted of more than the 'three searchlights' previously attributed to Benghazi, and the trio of Ju 88s were lucky to escape unscathed from the reception they were given.

The following evening, a larger force of 14 bombers also headed for Tobruk to attack shipping reported to be in the harbour there. When they arrived over the target area shortly before 1900 hrs, the Ju 88s spotted two Royal Navy destroyers just putting out to sea. Several of the crews opted to dive on the warships rather than on the merchantmen berthed in the harbour. One bomb pierced the side of HMS *Dainty* and penetrated deep into its oil bunkers before exploding. The 1375-ton destroyer was quickly engulfed in flames and soon went down.

On 25 February the Ju 88s of 7./KG 30 flew in to Gerbini – another field on the Catanian plain south of Mount Etna. This *Staffel* was led by Oberleutnant Hajo Herrmann who, although now better known as the originator of the *Wilde Sau* nightfighter force later employed in the defence of the Reich, had been a highly successful bomber pilot during the early war years. He was already wearing the Knight's Cross by the time of his arrival on Sicily.



The next Ju 88 bomber unit to join LG 1 on Sicily was 7./KG 30. This is '4D+DR', one of the *Staffel's* A-5s, pictured at Gerbini taking a breather between operations, with Mount Etna again providing the backdrop

The rest of III./KG 30 was scheduled to follow 7. *Staffel* down from Holland some five days later. Until it did so, Herrmann's unit was to be subordinated to the *Stab* of LG 1. Little time was lost in calling upon their services. The groundcrews, who had accompanied the *Staffel* to Sicily aboard two Ju 52/3m transports, had scarcely had time to wash the black distemper off the undersides of the bombers (a legacy of their recent participation in the night Blitz over Britain) when Oberst Friedrich-Karl Knust, the *Geschwaderkommodore* of LG 1, was on the line to Hajo Herrmann. *X. Fliegerkorps* had ordered that a major raid be mounted against Malta the following day, and every available bomber was to take part – Ju 87s, He 111s and the Ju 88s of II. and III./LG 1 and 7./KG 30.

The attack of 26 February 1941 was one of the heaviest raids Malta had experienced to date. And although the island's ainti-aircraft gunners were credited with a Ju 88 shot down into the sea, and a Hurricane pilot claimed another as a probable, it appears that none were in fact lost. The Ju 88s would continue to mount smaller-scale raids on Malta, and they would suffer losses in the process. In another attack on Luqa exactly a week later, for example, one of 4./LG 1's machines failed to return. However, for most crews the end of February and the beginning of March meant a resumption of their routine convoy escort duties, interspersed with missions in support of Rommel's troops in Libya.

On 28 February aircraft of III./LG 1 bombed Tobruk. Although RAF fighters rose to intercept them, all the Ju 88s returned safely to Sicily. Meanwhile, 7./KG 30 had been despatched against a small formation of enemy ships reported to be heading westwards along the African coast. After searching in vain for the vessels in poor visibility, Hajo Herrmann and his crews subsequently put down at Tripoli to refuel, before they too headed back to Sicily. One machine that detoured to carry out a reconnaissance of Benghazi *en route* failed to make it. Emerging from low cloud over the harbour area, Unteroffizier Peter Müller's '4D+HR' fell victim to an RAAF Hurricane. That same evening the Knight's Cross-wearing Major Arved Crüger, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./KG 30, landed in Sicily with his 8. and 9. *Staffeln*.

For much of the first half of March 1941, the aircraft of LG 1 continued with maritime patrol and convoy escort activities. They also mounted several harassing attacks on Malta, both by day and by night. 13 March was typical. While III. *Gruppe* spent most of that day shepherding yet more supply convoys across the Mediterranean, II./LG 1 divided its strength by despatching machines on two separate bombing raids, both in the early hours of the morning. One group targeted Malta's Grand Harbour, while the other struck at El Adem airfield in the desert south of Tobruk. Now occupied by the British, El Adem had been the largest Italian airbase in Libya. As they left the target area crews reported seeing hangars and parked aircraft burning fiercely, although many of the latter may have been unserviceable machines abandoned and left scattered about the field by the fleeing Italians.

The Ju 88s did not return immediately to Sicily, but flew instead to an airfield near Tripoli where they were refuelled and bombed up again. Then they headed back to Tobruk, attacking troop positions near the town, before finally heading northwest for Catania and home, which they reached shortly before midday – an 11-hour shuttle mission carried out without loss.

By the end of March the German advance along the African coast was gaining momentum. In the face of inexplicably weak resistance, what had initially been launched as a reconnaissance in force soon developed into a full-blown offensive. Rommel's superiors in Berlin and Rome tried to rein him in, but the general was having none of it. He urged his troops on. They would retake Agedabia on 2 April and enter Benghazi just two days after that. Now he had his sights set on Tobruk. He was being ably supported throughout by the Ju 87 Stukas of *Fliegerführer Afrika*. But the Sicilian-based Ju 88s were conspicuous by their absence. The main focus of *their* attentions had abruptly switched to the eastern Mediterranean.

Just as their initial transfer from the Channel front to Sicily had been brought about by Mussolini's ill-judged declaration of war against the Allies in June 1940, so the Ju 88s' latest change of direction, away from North Africa and towards the eastern end of the Mediterranean, was also the result of another botched offensive by the Italian *Duce*.

MARITA TO *MERKUR*

Unlike Hitler's territorial acquisitions in the period prior to World War 2 – the annexation of Austria and the occupation of Czechoslovakia spring immediately to mind – Mussolini's armed seaborne invasion of Albania at dawn on 7 April 1939, is now all but forgotten. Eighteen months later, having built up his forces on the far side of the Adriatic, Mussolini launched an attack on Greece. Expecting an easy victory, the *Duce* had neglected to tell Hitler of his plans. And like so many Italian forays, this one quickly ran into trouble. The embattled Greeks accepted Britain's offer of assistance and the invaders were not simply stopped in their tracks, but chased back into Albania.

Having driven the British Army out of northwest continental Europe in the early summer of 1940, the *Führer* did not now want his enemy – in the early spring of 1941 – setting firm foot in the southeastern reaches of his domain. He therefore ordered measures to be taken to disrupt the flow of Allied shipping transporting men and materials from Egypt to their forward base at Souda Bay, on the island of Crete, and thence onwards to southern Greece.

It is more than a little ironic that while the Axis were pouring supplies southwards across the Mediterranean to build up their forces in North Africa, the British were despatching convoys *northwards* every three days in support of the Greeks. It was this further weakening of Gen Wavell's overstretched and overburdened Desert Army that was allowing the *Afrika Korps* to make such significant gains in its advance through Libya.

LG 1's Sicilian-based *Gruppen* were heavily involved in this two-way traffic. While III./LG 1 continued to devote much of its time to escorting Rommel's supply convoys, II./LG 1 was given the job of interrupting the flow of Allied shipping between Egypt and Crete.

The Balkans campaign resulted in LG 1 switching its attentions from Malta to the eastern Mediterranean. This was to become its main area of operations for very nearly the next three years

On 18 March 1941, 17 of the *Gruppe's* Ju 88s were sent off on an armed reconnaissance of the sea areas around Crete. Having been given strict instructions not to violate Greek airspace, the crews failed to spot any enemy vessels. After putting down on the Italian island of Rhodes to refuel, they returned to Catania with nothing to report.

It was to be a different story three days later, however, when a small formation of Ju 88s led by Hauptmann Joachim Helbig (the *Kapitän* of 4.*Staffel*) sighted a convoy of merchant vessels, escorted by capital ships of the Royal Navy – including the aircraft carrier *Formidable* and cruiser *Bonventure* – off the Kithera Channel between Crete and Greece. Helbig called up the rest of II. *Gruppe*, which was ready and waiting at Catania.

In a late afternoon attack north of Crete, the bombers claimed two of the four merchantmen sunk and a third severely damaged. But it would appear that none of the ships actually went down. The 'large tanker' credited to *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Gerhard Kollewe was, in all probability, the 8271-ton Danish tanker *Marie Maersk*, which although badly damaged and on fire, managed to reach Greece – only to be bombed and sunk in Piraeus harbour on 12 April.

This operation of 21 March resulted in LG 1's first combat loss of the month when one of the machines that had initially sighted the convoy shortly after midday was engaged by a Fulmar from *Formidable*. In trying to escape from the fighter, 5. *Staffel's* 'L1+DN' ventured too close to the ships and was brought down by naval anti-aircraft fire.

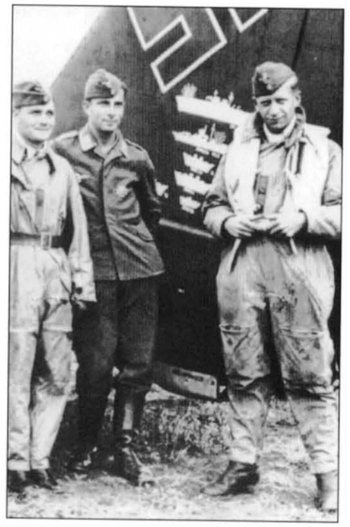
Further anti-shipping strikes were flown over the next few days. On 22 March two vessels were hit off Gavdo Island to the south of Crete, one of which – the 8070-ton Norwegian tanker *Solheim* – was bombed again and sent to the bottom by II./LG 1 24 hours later. Eleven aircraft of II. *Gruppe* failed to locate several cruisers southwest of Crete on 24 March, but an attack on a convoy in the same area the following day resulted in a claim by a member of LG 1's *Geschwaderstab* for one merchantman sunk;

'My three SC bombs hit the water directly alongside the largest freighter in the convoy. As I withdrew, the ship exploded in a cloud of white smoke. I landed back at Catania at 1850 hrs. Shortly afterwards I was credited in writing with the sinking of an 8000-tonner.'

Despite this, the vessel in question, the 6992-ton *Baluchistan*, survived the three near misses – and for another 12 months after that, until finally falling victim to a U-boat off the coast of West Africa in March 1942.

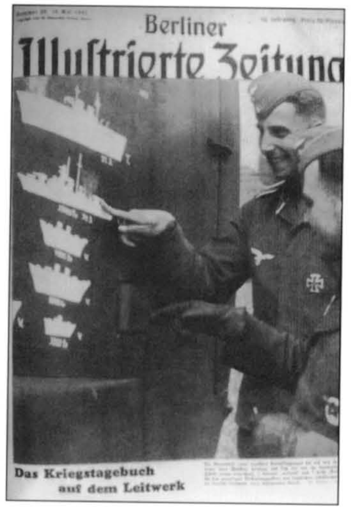
Irritated by the fact that Luftwaffe bombers were shouldering the full burden of the eastern Mediterranean anti-convoy operations, Hitler pressurised Mussolini to add his weight, insisting that 'the Italians must *at least* do something to prevent British supplies from reaching Greece'. Rome decided that the honour should fall to the Italian navy. On the evening of 26 March a battleship, five cruisers and ten destroyers sailed from ports in southern Italy to carry out a sweep to the southeast of Crete.

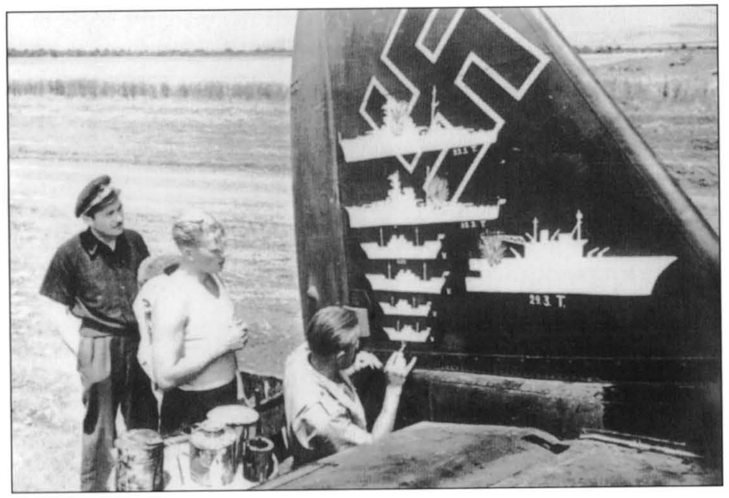
But instead of intercepting their intended target – a convoy bound for Piraeus – the Italians were met by units of the main British fleet. This was a far superior force including three battleships and the carrier *Formidable*. The ensuing Battle of Cape Matapan – an engagement described by the Allies at the time as 'the most momentous naval victory since Trafalgar' – ended disastrously for the Italians. Lacking the benefit of radar, their ships suffered heavy losses during the night of 28/29 March. The battleship



Three unidentified crewmen pose somewhat self-consciously in front of the shipping scoreboard painted on the tailfin of their Ju 88. The individual in the centre does, however . . .

. . . manage to summon up a broad smile for the official war photographer, whose shot was later used on the front cover of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* of 15 May 1941. He is pointing proudly to a hit scored on a '35,000-ton' warship on 24 March, which ties in neatly with III./KG 30's claims for hits on a 'battleship and a patrol boat' north of Benghazi on that date. But what of that top silhouette recording a hit on a carrier (almost certainly HMS *Formidable*) dated 29 March . . .


Berliner
Illustrierte Zeitung
Das Kriegstagebuch auf dem Leitwerk



. . . which also features prominently on the tail of this machine? This oft-seen photo, showing a fourth merchantman sunk being added to the crew's overall score, has in the past been attributed to LG 1 . . .

Vittorio Veneto was damaged, and three heavy cruisers and two destroyers were sunk.

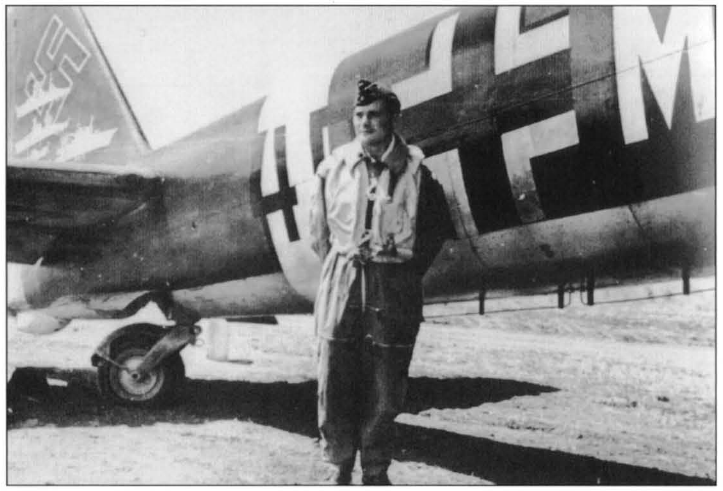
After first sighting and reporting the lightly defended ten-ship convoy that the Italians had hoped to annihilate (but which escaped detection by reversing course under cover of darkness), the Ju 88s of LG 1 had played little further direct part in the Battle of Cape Matapan. They were, however, charged with protecting the surviving Italian warships throughout the daylight hours of 24 March as they made their way back to their home ports. This cost them one of their number, some sources suggesting that 6. *Staffel's* 'L1+EP' was despatched by a Fulmar over the Gulf of Taranto. However, several crews reported seeing a Ju 88 shot down by flak from one of the Italian vessels that it was supposed to be escorting.

In the wake of Matapan, with III./LG 1 still primarily employed in the essential, but generally uneventful, shepherding of seaborne supplies to North Africa, II. *Gruppe* resumed its campaign against the convoys plying between Egypt and Greece. On 2 April, eight machines led by Hauptmann Joachim Helbig discovered two empty convoys southbound off Gardo Island on their way back to Egypt. Two ships were sunk, one of them the 5324-ton freighter *Homefield*, and a third was damaged.

At about the same time, a formation of Ju 88s headed by *Gruppenkommandeur* Gerhard Kollewe found another convoy, this one fully laden, heading north towards Greece. The 6054-ton merchantman *Devis* was hit, but was able to continue on to Piraeus, only to suffer further damage there during a bombing raid on 6 April. Before the convoy reached the illusory safety of the Greek port, however, it would be subjected to a second attack by Hauptmann Kollewe and his crews. This was delivered some 24 hours later, at about 1900 hrs on 3 April, when the vessels were in the Antikithera Channel northwest of Crete.

Although the convoy's escort had been strengthened in the meantime by the addition of the anti-aircraft cruiser *Calcutta*, this did not prevent the Ju 88s from hitting the *Northern Prince* with four bombs – two of them direct hits amidships. It immediately caught fire and began giving off clouds of smoke. Ten minutes later the vessel was torn apart by a huge explosion, the towering smoke and flames being visible 40 miles away. The 10,917-ton vessel had been packed with munitions and explosives.

II./LG 1's anti-convoy operations from Catania to the sea areas around and beyond Crete often entailed flights lasting anything up to six hours. Yet despite all their efforts – and successes such as the sinking of the *Northern Prince* – supplies were still getting through to Greece on a regular basis, and the position of the Italian forces in Albania was worsening daily. And it was his ally's plight, combined with instability in Yugoslavia, where a pro-Axis government had just been toppled by a popular uprising, which prompted Hitler to take further action. With his planned invasion of the USSR only weeks away, he could not afford to have the Balkans in turmoil to the rear of his advance into Russia.

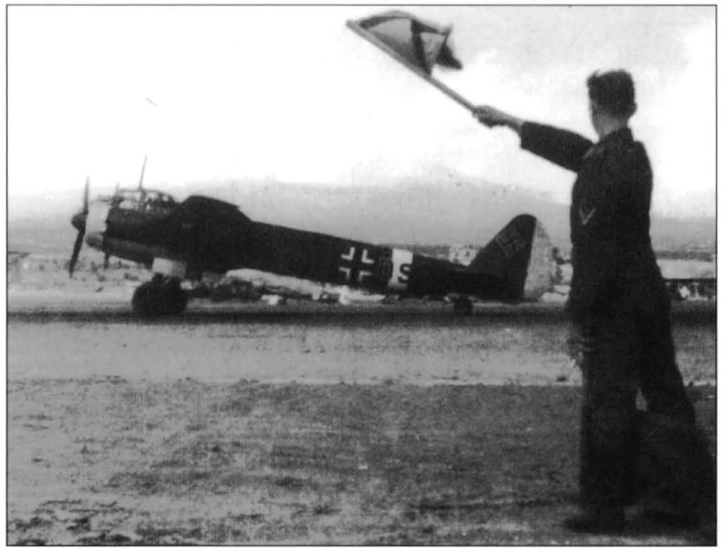


. . . but another shot clearly identifies it as 7./KG 30's '4D+MR'. It is obviously a different aircraft from that featured on the cover of the Berlin newspaper. But is it a replacement machine flown by the same crew? Almost two months have passed since the earlier photographs were taken. The top silhouette superimposed on the tail swastika of 'MR' records a hit on a battleship scored on 23 May – possibly HMS *Barham* retiring after bombarding Scarpanto – and the life-jacketed figure seen here looks suspiciously like the individual on the left of the original trio. Definitely one for the historians to get their teeth into!

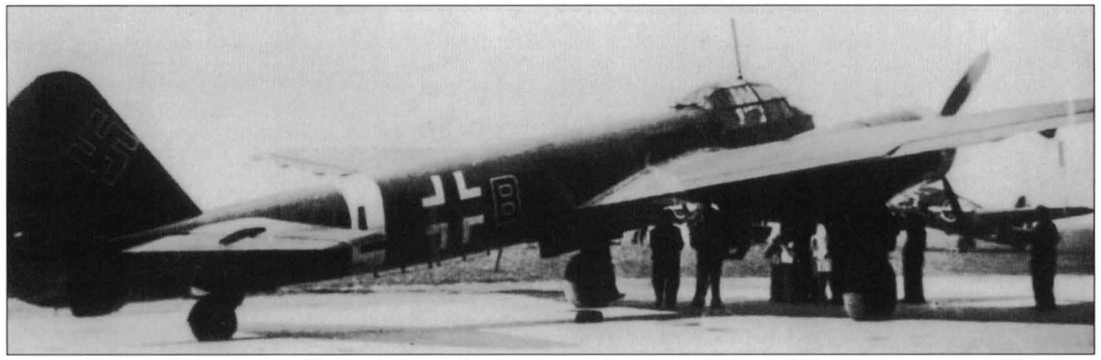
Hitler had long ago decided to occupy Greece should this become necessary in order to secure his position in the eastern Mediterranean. Now he added Yugoslavia to his target list, determined to eradicate this unexpected thorn in his side before embarking on the more difficult task of subjugating the Greeks and driving their British allies back into the sea. Hitler's fury at the Yugoslav people for overthrowing the recently installed Axis-friendly government may be gauged from the wording of his War Directive No 15, dated 27 March 1941, in which he states that he would destroy the country 'militarily and as a national entity'. Yugoslavia, he went on to say, was to be pulverised 'with merciless brutality in a lightning operation'.

There was already a small Luftwaffe presence – mainly single-engined fighters and tactical reconnaissance units – stationed in Rumania to the northeast of Yugoslavia. But much more striking power was required for the forthcoming campaign, and a rapid build-up of Luftwaffe strength in the area was set in motion.

Foremost among the bomber units transferred to southeast Europe were the three *Gruppen* of Major Hans Bruno Schulz-Heyn's Ju 88-equipped *Kampfgeschwader* 51 'Edelweiss'. From their fields south of Paris, the units' 78 Junkers staged at low-level across France and Germany down into Austria to take up residence on their new bases around Vienna – *Stab*, I. and II. *Gruppen* at Wiener Neustadt and III./KG 51 at Schwechat. Here, they formed the largest single component of *Luftflotte* 4, the air



Although of dubious quality, this wartime cutting showing 8./KG 51's '9K+DS' getting clearance for take-off is sufficiently clear to illustrate the obvious difference between the white aft fuselage band of the Mediterranean theatre and the yellow markings (applied here to the machine's engine nacelles and rudder) carried during the brief campaign in the Balkans. Note that the gefreiter in the foreground is waving a white flag with a green cross on it, signalling the pilot that he is clear to take-off, while holding the red one (which, when raised, instructed to crew to remain where they were) close to the ground beside his leg



An unidentified Ju 88A-5 of LG 1 ('BN' or 'BS'?), purportedly photographed during II. and III. *Gruppen's* two-day deployment to Grottaglie, in Italy (note the twin-engined *Regia Aeronautica* Caproni Ca.310 in the background). The bombers' short-lived involvement over Yugoslavia presumably did not warrant the application of yellow Balkan campaign markings

fleet charged with the major aerial offensive against Yugoslavia from the north.

At about the same time a single Ju 88 *Gruppe* that had also been serving in France was attached to *VIII. Fliegerkorps*, the Luftwaffe's primary close-support command, whose Stukas and ground-attack aircraft were gathering in Bulgaria in preparation for an assault on Yugoslavia from the east. This unit was I./LG 1, the only component of the *Lehrgeschwader* that had continued to operate over Great Britain after the transfer of *Stab*, II. and III./LG 1 to Sicily in late 1940. But I. *Gruppe* had remained at Orléans-Bricy for barely another month before being ordered back to Germany, and from there – via Austria and Rumania – to Bulgaria, where it touched down at Plovdiv-Krumovo in the second week of March.

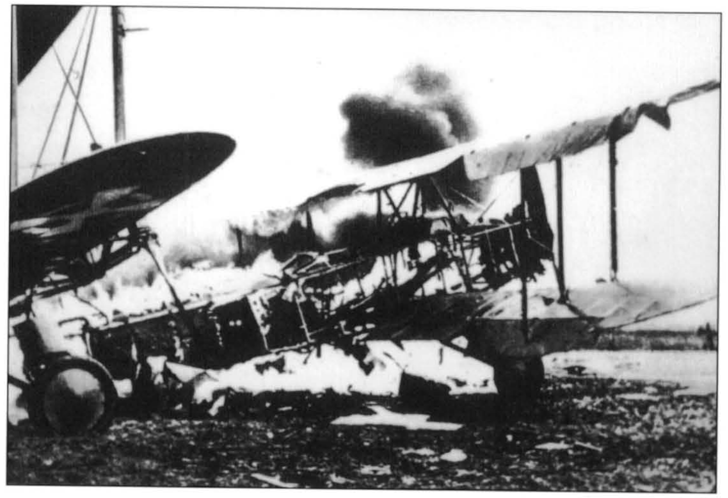
Finally, almost closing the ring of steel being drawn around Yugoslavia, II. and III./LG 1 were temporarily moved forward from Catania to Grottaglie, on the heel of Italy, from where they would make the short hop across the Adriatic to attack Yugoslavia from the southeast. The other occupants of Catania, Major Arved Crüger's III./KG 30, remained on Sicily to continue their sweeps of the eastern Mediterranean sea lanes.

Another cutting from a wartime magazine, the original caption to this illustration describes it as 'The bombing of Fortress Belgrade', adding that 'the smoke and flames were visible from a distance of 70 kilometres away'

ACTION IN YUGOSLAVIA

It was the Austrian-based bombers of *Luftflotte* 4 (three of the seven *Gruppen* involved being the Ju 88s of KG 51) that were to strike the first blow against Yugoslavia. Hitler's orders to the air fleet were clear;

'As soon as sufficient forces have been assembled and the weather permits, the Yugoslavian air force's ground organisations and Belgrade are to be destroyed by the Luftwaffe in continuous day and night attacks'.



Like every *Blitzkrieg* that preceded it, the assault on Yugoslavia opened with pre-emptive strikes on the enemy's airfields. Here, they were evidently successful, although just how great a threat to the invaders these particular machines – they appear to be Rogozarski trainers – might have posed is open to question

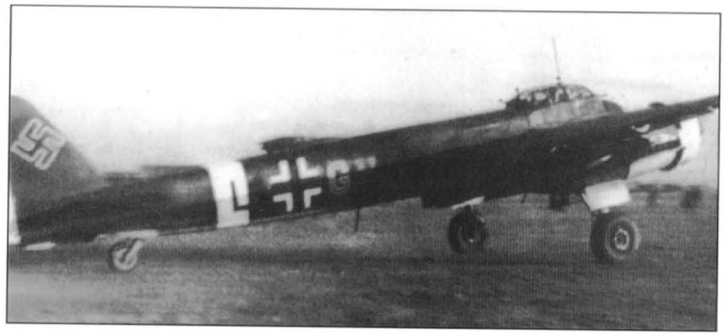
That time came at 0515 hrs on 6 April 1941 when, without any prior declaration of war, *Luftflotte* 4's bombers struck at Belgrade's governmental quarter and every major Yugoslav airfield. From 10,500 ft out of a cloudless blue sky, KG 51's Ju 88s unloaded their high-explosive bombs and incendiaries on the enemy capital, causing widespread devastation. During another raid later in the day, Hauptmann Heinrich Hahn's I. *Gruppe* came under fierce attack from Yugoslav fighters and three of their machines returned to base with battle damage.

At the same time, far to the south, I./LG 1 flew three missions to widely differing targets. The first of these operations saw it attacking defence positions in the mountains bordering Greece. Later that morning the Ju 88s struck at an army HQ in Skoplje, before bombing the munitions works in Krusevac in mid-afternoon. No aircraft were lost.

Meanwhile, the Italian-based elements of LG 1 had crossed the Adriatic to strike at airfields in central and southern Yugoslavia. *Stab* and III. *Gruppe* hit Sarajevo, while II./LG 1 headed for Podgorica. Hauptmann Nietsch's III./LG 1 then undertook a second operation, dividing their strength to attack barracks at Mostar and the seaplane base at Kotor. II. and III. *Gruppe* each reported aircraft damaged in crash-landings back at Grottaglie, and the remainder returned that same evening to Catania, their short-lived part in the Yugoslavian campaign over.

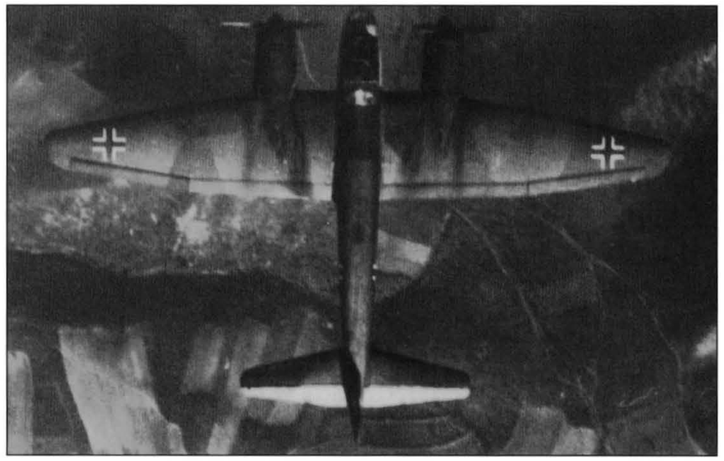
After the clear blue skies of 5 April, a band of persistent bad weather set in over the Vienna area for the next five days. This did not make KG 51's task of mounting 'continuous day and night attacks' any easier, but the crews kept up the pressure on the enemy. On 7 April it was I. *Gruppe* that again bore the brunt of determined Yugoslav resistance, losing one aircraft from each of its three component *Staffeln*, while II. and III./LG 1 reported a machine apiece written off in crash-landings.

Poor weather conditions also hampered operations in the south of the country on 7 April. I./LG 1 flew an early morning raid against road and rail targets around Veles, but a second attack on the enemy HQ on Skoplje planned for the afternoon had to be aborted. During the course of the day two of the *Gruppe's* Ju 88s were damaged in crash-landings upon returning to base. One of them was flown by future Knight's Cross winner and 'Wilde Sau' pilot Leutnant Iro Ilk. He tried to put down at the nearby civil airfield near Plovdiv, but unlike the wide expanse of neighbouring Krumovo airfield, this proved too small for a machine the size of a Ju 88.



The fuselage codes on this Ju 88A-5 taxiing out to take off appear to be 'L1+GN', which would indicate its being a machine of 5./LG 1. As it is clearly wearing Balkan campaign yellow markings on nacelles (and rudder), it not only gives the lie to the caption of the photograph on page 20, it is also a perfect illustration of the old adage so dear to many ex-members of the Luftwaffe – 'the only hard-and-fast rule in the wartime Luftwaffe was that there *were* no hard-and-fast rules!'

8 April witnessed a re-run of the previous day for I./LG 1 – a morning raid on road junctions around Nis before the weather again closed in during the afternoon. Heavy snow in the Plovdiv-Krumovo areas on 11 and 12 April finally brought the *Gruppe's* operations to a total standstill. It also effectively ended I./LG 1's part in the war against Yugoslavia, for with the Yugoslav army already on the ropes, the *Gruppe's* activities were now being directed against Greece.

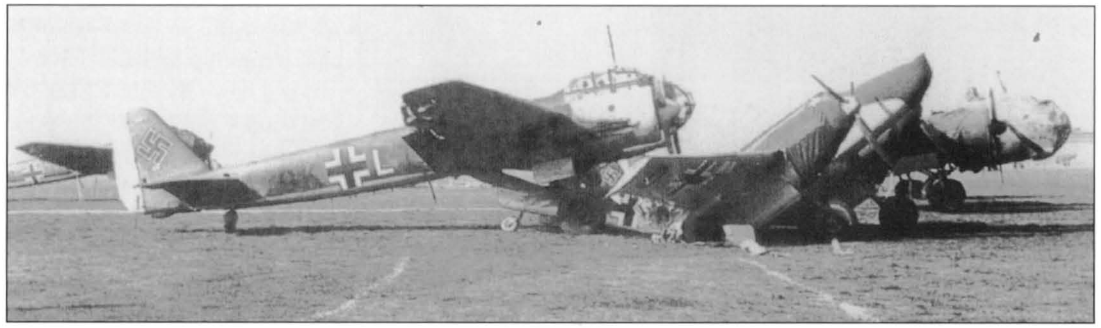


This photograph of an unidentified I./LG 1 aircraft, taken over Yugoslavia early in April 1941, muddies the waters even further: instead of yellow nacelles and rudder, it appears to have a yellow (some sources suggest white) nose and elevators!

While the campaign had cost I./LG 1 just two aircraft damaged, KG 51 continued to pay a price, albeit a small one, after an improvement in the weather in the Vienna region allowed the resumption of intensive bombing operations in the north. Details are sketchy (and conflicting), but in raids on such targets as Novi Sad, Banja Luka, Mostar and Dubrovnik, the *Geschwader* suffered the loss of several machines. These included II. *Gruppe's* '9K+LP', downed by a Yugoslav Hurricane near Banja Luka, and the aircraft of Hauptmann Hans Berlin, the *Kapitän* of 6. *Staffel*, who was killed together with his entire crew. Conversely, the rear gunner of another Ju 88 shot down an attacking Hurricane during the bombing of Mostar airfield.

On 13 April KG 51 participated in a series of heavy raids on the Sarajevo region. These were carried out on the personal orders of Hitler, who had apparently been informed that the Yugoslav government had sought refuge in several large hotels in the spa resort of Ilidza just to the west of the town. III. *Gruppe* alone flew 29 individual sorties against these targets. By this time the end in Yugoslavia was clearly in sight. On 14 April the army's commander-in-chief began negotiations for a general cease-fire. The following day KG 51 flew some of its final misions of the campaign when it dive-bombed shipping in Dubrovnik harbour. Forty-eight hours later Yugoslavia capitulated.

While *Stab*, II. and III./KG 51 remained at their bases around Vienna, I. *Gruppe* staged via Arad, in Rumania, down to Krumovo. Here it would operate alongside the Ju 88s of I./LG 1 against Greece for the best part of another month, before rejoining its parent unit in Austria in mid-May in preparation for the move into Poland, its jumping-off point for the invasion of the USSR four weeks later. But this was not the last the Mediterranean theatre had seen of the 'Edelweiss' *Geschwader*. II./KG 51 would return briefly to Greece in the autumn of 1943.



Another 'difference of opinion'. In this instance, 9./KG 51's '9K+LT' appears to be the guilty party, as both the Bf 110 and the Do 17 pictured on the right are swathed in tarpaulins, and were presumably stationary at the moment of impact

ASSAULT ON GREECE

6 April 1941 had not only witnessed the start of the savage aerial bombardment of Belgrade, it also saw the launch of the ground and air onslaught on mainland Greece. But at least the Greeks received a declaration of war, even if it *was* delivered by Hitler's ambassador in Athens at 0530 hrs that morning, and deliberately timed to coincide with the first German troops crossing the Bulgarian border and beginning their drive on Salonika in Greece's northeastern province of Thessaloniki.

Until now the Luftwaffe had been concentrating its efforts on the supply convoys ferrying British troops up from Egypt. However, with the *Führer's* strict ban on violating Greek airspace a thing of the past, the war against the British and Greek Royal Air Forces could begin in earnest. But with all three *Gruppen* of LG 1 engaged over Yugoslavia on this opening day of the twin campaigns, it fell to the Ju 88 units still based in Sicily to score the first successes, and suffer the first casualties of Operation *Marita*, as the invasion of Greece had been code-named when plans were first drawn up back in December 1940.

The first loss sustained was one of the 14 Ju 88Ds of 2.(F)/123, a second long-range reconnaissance *Staffel* that had joined 1.(F)/122 at Catania in mid-March. Heading for the Athens area, Unteroffizier Fritz Dreyer's '4U+EK' was intercepted by an RAF Hurricane over the Gulf of Corinth and shot into the sea off Patras.

Indicative of the reconnaissance units' wide area of operations – and proof that the campaign in Greece was not being fought to the exclusion of other fronts – 'EK's' sister-ship, '4U+FK', was reported missing in very similar circumstances just 24 hours later, shot down by a Hurricane some 400 miles away! Caught over Tobruk harbour, Oberfeldwebel Werner Reinicke's Ju 88D crashed into the sea off Bardia.

And whereas the loss of the first Ju 88 over Greece may admittedly have been of little significance (except to the unfortunate Unteroffizier Dreyer and his crew), the Junkers' first success of the campaign was a devastating raid on Piraeus harbour. Serving as the destination for the vast majority of the supply convoys that had been bringing men and materials from Egypt since early February, Piraeus was packed with shipping on the evening of 6 April when 20 Ju 88s of III./KG 30 lifted off from Catania.

Most of the bombers were armed with just two aerial mines apiece, the intention being to block the narrow entrance to the harbour. But Hauptmann Hajo Herrmann had ordered that his 7. *Staffel* machines should each be loaded with two 250-kg bombs as well. At the end of the 465-mile flight to the target area, he did not want to see his mines drift down on their parachutes and simply disappear into the water. After all that effort, he was determined to attack the merchantmen berthed in the harbour – it was to prove a momentous decision.

The more heavily loaded aircraft of 7./KG 30 were flying the low position in the loose formation as the Ju 88s swooped down on Piraeus from the direction of Corinth at 2100 hrs. After releasing their mines as directed, Herrmann's crews made for the ships. At least three of the *Staffel's* bombs – Herrmann's among them – struck the 7529-ton *Clan Fraser*, a recently arrived ammunition ship packed with 350 tons of TNT, only 100 tons of which had been unloaded when the attack came in. As well as the three direct hits, it was surrounded by near misses, which destroyed buildings and stores on the quayside. The initial blast lifted the vessel out of the water and snapped its mooring lines. The shockwave from the explosion was felt by Herrmann and his crew as their '4D+AR' was thrown about 'like a leaf in a squall' 3300 ft above the harbour.

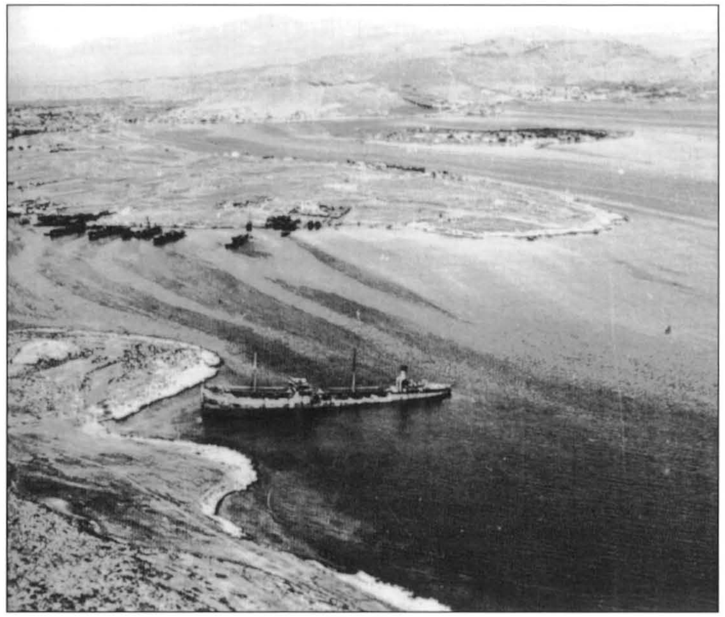
But worse was to follow. As the *Clan Fraser* drifted, its plates glowing from the fires raging inside her, the flames spread to other vessels in the harbour, including the 7100-ton *City of Roubaix*, which was also carrying munitions. Despite the danger, desperate efforts were made to get the situation under control. But the blazing ships could not be towed away for fear that they would hit a mine and block the harbour approach channel.

Suddenly, in the early hours of 7 April, the *Clan Fraser* erupted in a giant fireball. Minutes later the *City of Roubaix* went up as well. The resultant series of explosions, which destroyed nine other merchantmen and devastated the port of Piraeus, shattered windows in Athens seven miles away, and were reportedly heard over a distance of up to 150 miles.

In all, close on 100 vessels were lost, including some 60 small lighters and barges. Grievous as this was, the damage to the port of Piraeus itself was far more serious. In the explosions, described by one historian as 'of near nuclear proportions', it had been razed almost from end to end. Adm Sir Andrew Cunningham, C-in-C of the Mediterranean Fleet, called the raid on Piraeus a 'devastating blow'. At a single stroke it had destroyed the one port sufficiently and adequately equipped to serve as a base through which the British Army could be supplied.

Piraeus would be closed to all shipping for the next ten days. During this time incoming vessels had to be diverted to other ports such as nearby Salamis, or Volos far up on Greece's Aegean coast. And even after it had been partially reopened, such was the damage that it was no longer able to operate properly. The master of one vessel that put in to Salamis on 9 April and visited Piraeus two days later described the place as being 'in a state of chaos caused by the explosion of the *Clan Fraser*, which had been hit while discharging ammunition. The ship had disappeared and blown up the rest of the docks, and pieces of her were littered about the streets.'

The man responsible for much of this chaos and mayhem, Hauptmann Hajo Herrmann, had not escaped totally unscathed. At some stage during the raid the port engine of his Ju 88 had been damaged by anti-aircraft fire. And for safety's sake, rather than risk the long flight back to Catania, he headed eastwards and landed on Rhodes – only to run his aircraft off the end of the runway!



This aerial shot of the Piraeus area, taken in late April 1941, gives little indication of the mayhem that occurred there earlier in the month during the night of 6-7 April, except, perhaps, for the dark streams of oil still leaking from the half-sunken ships

Adm Cunningham was undoubtedly right. The destruction of Piraeus *was* a disaster. But even if the port had been fully functional, it is unlikely that it would have altered the outcome of the brief but bloody campaign in Greece. The invaders were too powerful for the Greek and British Commonwealth troops opposing them, irrespective of how many last-minute reinforcements might have come through a still intact Piraeus.

In fact, in less than three weeks the British would be driven back down the length of Greece to some of the country's southernmost beaches, where they were rescued in a Dunkirk-like evacuation. This was not the end of their Grecian odyssey, however, for instead of being transported back to Egypt, they were delivered to the island of Crete, from where the survivors would undergo a second evacuation just over a month later.

TARGETING ALLIED SHIPS

Although the Mediterranean Ju 88s flew a number of sorties in support of the German army in the field in Greece (while at the same time also operating over Malta, North Africa and on convoy escort duties), most of the actions they were involved in during the Greek and Cretan campaigns were directed against Allied shipping. And during the combined ten days of the evacuations in which the two campaigns ended, they would exact a far greater toll of Allied warships and merchantmen than they had done during the entire ten weeks of anti-convoy missions flown before the ground fighting began.

The armed reconnaissance sweeps of the sea areas around Crete by aircraft of LG 1 on 8 and 10 April produced no sightings. But during a similar operation north of the island on the morning of 11 April machines of 9. *Staffel* found the Royal Navy's HMS *Calcutta*. This anti-aircraft vessel seemed to bear a charmed life. It had been attacked on numerous occasions while escorting convoys from Egypt during the previous weeks, and had been one of the three cruisers present in Piraeus harbour on the night of 6 April that had managed to put to sea before the second cataclysmic explosion of the *Clan Fraser*. Even now its luck held. Although bracketed by bombs to port and starboard the vessel sustained no hits.

In the evening of that same 11 April, eager to take advantage of the full moon, *X. Fliegerkorps* ordered a maximum effort by the Sicilian-based Ju 88s against any shipping still to be found in the Piraeus area (where 20 merchant vessels were anchored off the harbour, short of fuel). Some 45 bombers took off in two waves, 29 machines of LG 1 from Catania at 1800 hrs and 16 of III./KG 30 from Gerbini shortly after midnight. Four ships were sunk, including the damaged Danish tanker *Marie Maersk*. The last of the LG 1 aircraft to attack was that flown by Hauptmann Joachim Helbig, *Kapitän* of 4. *Staffel*. Recovering from the dive, his Ju 88 was coned by searchlights at an altitude of only some 1300 ft;

'I was a sitting duck for any nightfighter. And suddenly there one was, a twin-engined machine hurtling down at me from high on my right. At full throttle I pulled up hard to the left, and the fighter flashed past me. My radio-operator, Oberfeldwebel Franz Schlund, had him in his sights for just a split second. But that was enough. The enemy went down on fire and we saw him explode as he hit the ground.'

Helbig's opponent was almost certainly the Blenheim IF of No 30 Sqn reported lost that night.

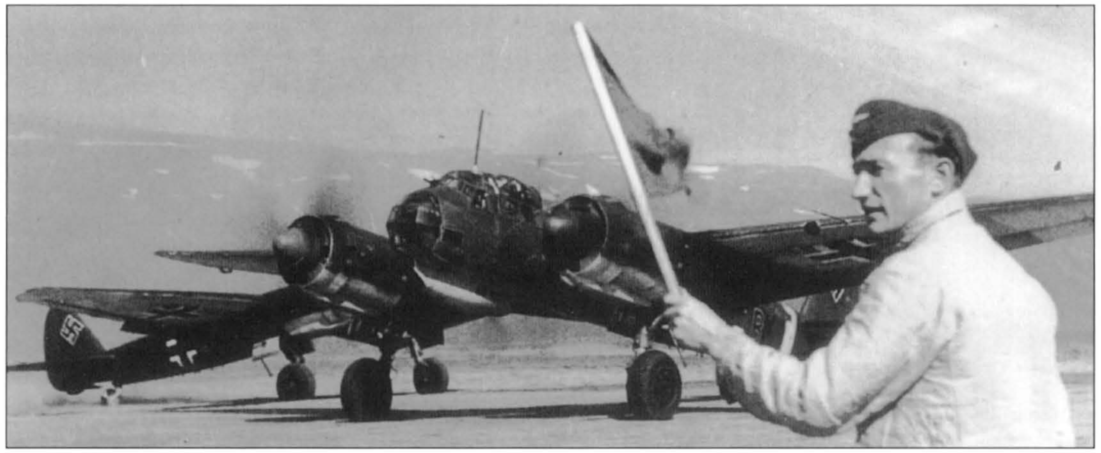
Forty-eight hours later, elements of III./KG 30 were back over the Piraeus-Salamis areas, where they claimed a merchantman damaged, but lost two of their own number. 5./LG 1 also reported a crew missing on this 13 April when one of its Ju 88s was forced to ditch after attacking a convoy west of Crete.

By this stage I./LG 1 was also beginning to operate against Greek targets from its base at Krumovo, in Bulgaria. On 13 April 20 of its Ju 88s participated in a major raid on Volos Harbour. The port was severely damaged, and among the ships sunk was the 7140-ton *City of Karachi*, a vessel diverted to Volos after the destruction of Piraeus. But Hauptmann Hoffmann's *Gruppe* also had a price to pay for this success, for a machine from 1. *Staffel* was shot down by one of the RAF Hurricanes stationed at nearby Larissa. Later that same afternoon I./LG 1 attacked Australian and New Zealand troop positions around Servia.

Late in the evening of 14 April eight Ju 88s of Catania-based II./LG 1 again attacked Piraeus and the Gulf of Athens. Upon their return to Sicily they reported hits on two vessels. The damage inflicted was obviously greater than realised, for both the 7264-ton British steamer *Clan Cumming* and a smaller Turkish vessel went to the bottom. The following day, 24 of I./LG 1's aircraft returned to the Piraeus area. Among the seven vessels claimed sunk were the British merchantmen *Quiloa* (7765 tons) and *Goalpara* (5314 tons), both of which were subsequently beached and abandoned in Eleusis Bay. One crew failed to return from the raid, Unteroffizier Karl Stütz's 'L1+SK' last being seen four miles south of Athens, where it reportedly fell victim to yet another RAF Hurricane.

It would appear that I./LG 1 was accompanied on this occasion for the first time by aircraft of I./KG 51, which had just joined it in Bulgaria, for two badly-damaged 'Edelweiss' machines were written off in crash-landings back at Krumovo on this date. Two others put down with minor damage at Salonika, the major seaport in northeastern Greece that had been occupied by German troops six days earlier.

Heavy snow showers prevented operations out of Krumovo on 17 April (although the field was large, it was not equipped for bad-weather flying). Conditions improved sufficiently the following day to allow various *Staffeln* to carry out a number of missions in support of the ground fighting. These included bombing and strafing attacks on Allied positions around Larissa and Yanina. But when thick cloud descended over the mountains along the Greek-Bulgarian border, Major Kuno Hoffmann, the *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./LG 1, ordered his crews to divert to Salonika-Sedes rather than to attempt to make it back to base. This precaution was clearly necessary, as the *Kapitän* of 2./LG 1, Hauptmann Siegfried von Eichhorn, was badly injured when he crash-landed his machine due to severe icing-up.



The duty NCO holds 2./LG 1's 'L1+BK' with a raised red flag while he checks that the runway is clear. This photograph was reportedly taken at Krumovo, in Bulgaria, and the low range of hills in the background certainly seems to support this – even the patches of snow on their flanks match the known weather conditions. But the machines are clearly Ju 88A-4s. Were this pair among the first of the improved series to be delivered to the *Geschwader*, the one in the rear not even wearing a white fuselage band yet?

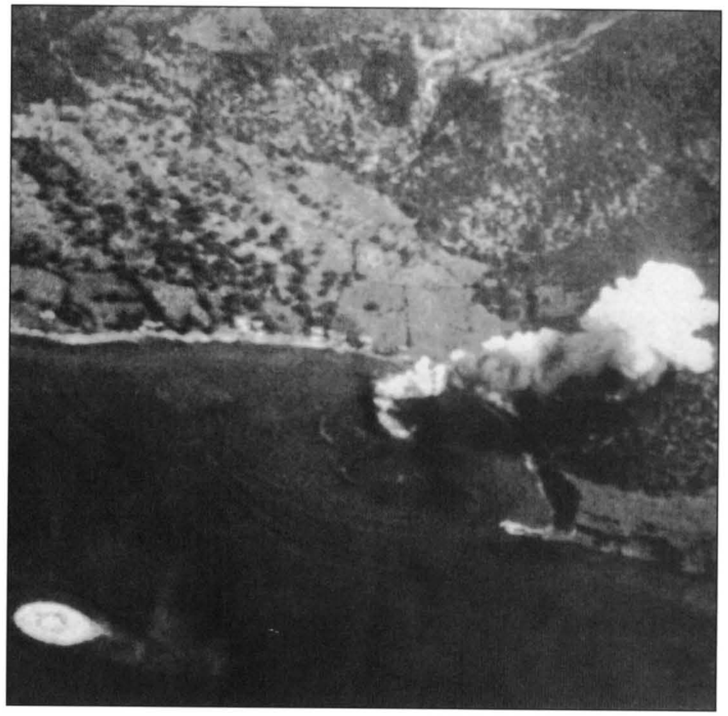
By now British and Commonwealth forces were in full retreat. On 19 April the Germans occupied both Larissa and Trikkala. That afternoon, having returned to Krumovo, I./LG 1 mounted a heavy raid on Khalkis harbour, claiming four freighters sunk and two damaged. Twenty-four hours later it put in another attack on the shipping still clustered around Piraeus. Among the vessels sunk was the Greek hospital ship *Ellenis*. But this time the *Gruppe* did not escape scot-free. Unteroffizier Helmut Benke's 'L1+ZH' was downed by Hurricanes near Athens and a 2. *Staffel* machine, badly damaged and with the navigator dead on board, was lost when it was forced to ditch in shallow water six miles north of Karies.

It was on 20 April that II. and III./LG 1 resumed their activities in Cretan waters, flying operations to the north and southeast of the island respectively. The next day, II. *Gruppe* undertook a second armed reconnaissance mission, this time south of Crete, where it caught and sank the 6098-ton tanker *British Lord*. Also on 21 April, I./LG 1 flew a number of what were termed '*freie Jagd* sweeps against shipping' in the Khalkis area, which netted the crews involved at least three Greek vessels.

I./LG 1's anti-shipping operations were taking a heavy toll of Allied merchantmen, and none more so than those flown over southern Greece and Crete on 22 April. By the end of that day the *Gruppe* had claimed seven vessels probably sunk and a further twelve damaged. Among the known losses were six small Greek ships. Major Hoffmann's crews may, however, also have been responsible for sinking one, or both, of the Greek destroyers *Psara* and *Ydra*, each of 1389 tons, that were recorded as lost in action against German aircraft on this date.

I./LG 1 kept up the pressure throughout 23 and 24 April, flying numerous armed reconnaissance sweeps – mostly in *Ketten* of just three aircraft – over the same areas between southern Greece and Crete. On the second of these two dates in particular, Allied shipping losses hit an all-time high with no fewer than fourteen vessels being reported sunk. Again, most of the

An unidentified merchant vessel burns fiercely from a direct hit 'somewhere on the Greek coast'



casualties were Greek, but numbered among them were two British merchantmen, the 4665-ton *Santa Clara Valley* and the 2269-ton *Cavallo*, both of which were caught and bombed at Nauplia (the latter, although abandoned, did not actually sink until the following day).

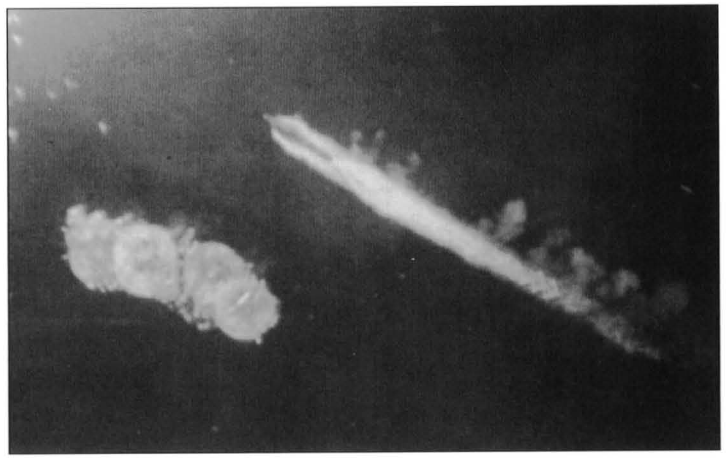
German ground forces had been matching the Luftwaffe success for success. The British had by now been driven back to the southernmost reaches of Greece, and it was on the evening of 24 April that Operation *Demon*, the Royal Navy's hastily organised plans for evacuation from eight small southern Greek ports, was put into effect. All of Adm Cunningham's available light forces, from cruisers down to landing craft – some 35 ships in all – plus a dozen transports, were to take part. Over the course of the next five nights (lacking air cover, operations could only be carried out during the hours of darkness) they would succeed in lifting off just over 50,000 troops – about 80 percent of the number originally transported to Greece prior to, and during, the short-lived campaign.

Throughout that time it had been the Allied merchant navies that had borne the brunt of the Luftwaffe's attacks. But now, during the evacuation from Greece and subsequent operations around Crete, it would be the warships of the Royal Navy that began to feel the full fury of the German bombers and dive-bombers.

There were, however, a number of unarmed merchantmen still to be lost before the last troops left the soil of Greece. Late in the afternoon of 25 April, elements of I./LG 1 discovered a group of some half-dozen ships heading towards Greece as part of the preparations for the second night of the evacuations. A single bomb hit the 16,381-ton Dutch vessel *Pennland*. At first the ship tried to continue its journey, but it was soon forced to turn back towards Crete. Shortly afterwards the vessel was attacked again, two more bombs sending it to the bottom. *Pennland* was the largest merchantman lost during the Greek and Cretan campaigns.

On the morning of 26 April the Ju 88s flew one last mission in support of the ground fighting. Shortly after sunrise several machines from both I./LG 1 and I./KG 51 lifted off from Krumovo to attack the Allied troops holding out along the Corinth Canal. While the *Lehrgeschwader* crews carried out low-level passes, strafing and dropping light bombs, the Ju 88s from I./KG 51 delivered their loads from high altitude. That afternoon much of I./LG 1 spent several hours searching in vain for a large convoy reported to be assembling north of Crete. The following day – which saw the first German troops enter Athens – I./LG 1 was back in the same area to the north of Crete where it caught and sank the 8672-ton Dutch freighter *Costa Rica*.

Merchantmen were often little more than sitting ducks. Fast and manoeuvrable warships in open water were a different proposition altogether, being much harder to hit, as witness this attack on the needle-like form of a Royal Navy destroyer heading into the glare of a sun-dappled patch of sea. The length of the vessel's wake and the puffs of smoke from its overworked boilers are vivid testimony to the speed at which the warship is travelling. It has evidently put the attacking Ju 88 off its aim, for what appears to be a full salvo of four 500-kg bombs has gone harmlessly into the water a good 250 yards off the vessel's port bow



CRETE UNDER ATTACK

By 29 April, with the evacuation of British forces from Greece completed, the Luftwaffe's attentions were focussing entirely on Crete. I./LG 1 carried out an attack on shipping in Souda Bay on this date, claiming damage to three vessels. This was to be its last operational mission of the campaign. Although personnel casualties had been relatively light, the past three weeks-plus of near continual flying had been costly in terms of material attrition. Down to just 17 serviceable machines at month's end, the *Gruppe* was taken off operations for a well-earned rest.

With Yugoslavia and Greece having been dealt with, Hitler now began to consider the question of Crete. He could hardly ignore the presence of an island base housing thousands of enemy troops just 62 miles off the southern extremities of his newly expanded *Festung Europa*. On 25 April the *Führer* therefore issued his War Directive No 28 for Operation *Merkur* ('Mercury'), the airborne invasion of Crete. However, his primary reason for the undertaking was, he declared in Paragraph 1 of the Directive, to secure the island 'as a base for air warfare against Great Britain in the Eastern Mediterranean'.

It would take several weeks to gather together the troops and transport aircraft required for the ambitious operation, and during that time an uneasy lull descended on the region. To fill the gap I./LG 1 was called back into action. On 3 May, despite having been stood down only days earlier, I./LG 1 took off on another six-hour mission to Souda Bay, the main anchorage on Crete's northern coast. It was accompanied by a handful of machines from I./KG 51. And although they would claim hits on the 7258-ton British merchantman *Araybank*, the raid cost the attackers two casualties. Both were aircraft of I./KG 51 and both were reportedly brought down by Hurricanes, '9K+LH' crashing on the island and '9K+GH' going into the sea off Souda Bay.

The next day machines of the two units were back over Souda Bay again, the luckless *Araybank* receiving further damage that meant that it had to be run aground to prevent it sinking. The vessel was declared a total loss after being bombed for a third time on 16 May.

On 13 May I./KG 51 handed its remaining aircraft over to I./LG 1 and the personnel departed northwards by rail to rejoin their parent *Geschwaderstab*, re-equipping in readiness for the forthcoming invasion of the Soviet Union. Thus reinforced, I./LG 1 found itself heading back to Souda Bay the following day. In fact, it flew two missions against the anchorage on 14 May. With barely an hour on the ground at Krumovo in which to refuel and bomb-up, the crews were in the air from 0535 hrs until 1800 hrs. And at the end they had very little to show for it. The only confirmed sinking was that of the 6343-ton British steamship *Dalesman*. Fortune still smiled on *Calcutta*, however, as although the cruiser was targeted in both raids, not a hit was scored on it. On 15 May I./LG 1 left Krumovo and transferred down to Eleusis, near Athens, where it was joined by II. *Gruppe*, which flew in from Catania the following day.

On the afternoon of 18 May I./LG 1 was back over its familiar Souda Bay stamping ground. Compared to the previous long haul down from Krumovo, in Bulgaria, the northern coast of Crete was now but a stone's throw away, and the Ju 88s could thus carry a much greater bomb load. It was in Souda Bay, while executing temporary repairs, that the heavy cruiser HMS *York* had been attacked and severely damaged by an Italian explosive motorboat back on 26 March. To prevent it from becoming a total loss, the vessel had been towed into shallow water and grounded. Although subjected to numerous air attacks since, the cruiser's main

In enclosed waters naval and merchant vessels were equally vulnerable. This is Souda Bay on the northern coast of Crete, the island's main anchorage. It was the target of numerous raids by the Luftwaffe

armament of six 8-inch guns had remained intact, and it still posed a considerable threat to any invader.

During its raid of 18 May the crews of I./LG 1 greatly reduced this threat by knocking out the *York's* two forward turrets with their 1000-kg bombs. Whether they had been specifically ordered to target the cruiser on this occasion and with this particular purpose in mind is no longer clear. The results achieved were certainly opportune, however, for just 48 hours later the skies above Souda Bay reverberated to the sound of hundreds of aircraft engines. The airborne invasion of Crete had begun.

The 13-day battle for Crete is now remembered mainly for the enormous casualties inflicted upon the invading forces and the transport aircraft that ferried them and their supplies to the island. The Luftwaffe combat command covering the operation was *General der Flieger* von Richthofen's *VIII. Fliegerkorps*. The *Korps'* Stukas had gained fame – notoriety would perhaps be the better word – for their close-support of German ground troops in the Polish and French campaigns (and more recently, the Yugoslav and Greek). But Crete added a new dimension – the waters surrounding the island.

Von Richthofen's units now faced a twofold task. Not only were they expected to offer direct support to German forces on the ground, they were also charged with keeping the British Mediterranean Fleet away from the island while the fighting was going on and, more importantly, ensuring that there was no repetition of the successful seaborne evacuation from Greece. To enable it to carry out this latter commitment, the predominantly Ju 87-equipped *VIII. Fliegerkorps* was temporarily assigned several longer range *Kampfgruppen*. The only Ju 88 units among them were I. and II./LG 1, now based at Eleusis together with Oberst Friedrich-Karl Knust's *Geschwaderstab*.

Shortly after midday on 20 May – the opening day of *Merkur* – I./LG 1 raided Souda Bay again, registering two direct hits on a 6000-ton vessel (possibly the wreck of the 6200-ton *Dalesman*, already claimed sunk by the *Gruppe* six days earlier). That afternoon both I. and II./LG 1 were sent out to search for a force of 'six Royal Navy ships' reported by reconnaissance to be off the southeast coast of Crete. The enemy warships (the two cruisers and four destroyers of 'Force C') remained elusive, however, and after a long and fruitless search most crews unloaded their bombs on Souda Bay when *en route* back to Eleusis.

Next day, the two *Gruppen* could hardly fail to find the numerous warships converging on Crete from seemingly all directions. Early morning reconnaissance reported groups of enemy vessels to the southeast, north and west of the island. I./LG 1's first attack was directed against the latter, which was the main British Battle Squadron comprising the two battleships *Warspite* and *Valiant* of 'Force A', plus a number of cruisers and destroyers. II./LG 1, meanwhile, had finally located 'Force C' off the eastern end of Crete

A view of Souda Bay from the ground, reportedly taken during I./LG 1's raid of 20 May. Columns of dense black smoke from two burning merchantmen darken the whole sky. In the centre of the photograph another merchant vessel has just been hit, while to the far left white smoke is pouring from the bow section of the unmistakable twin-funnelled shape of the listing and half-submerged cruiser *York* – perhaps from the attack two days earlier when I./LG 1 had claimed to have knocked out its two forward turrets

With little fear of Allied air intervention, aircraft shadowed and tracked the ships' movements throughout the day as one attack after the other went in against them. 21 May 1941 was to prove to be the beginning of one of the biggest air-sea engagements of the war to date, and by its end the two *Gruppen* of LG 1 alone had dropped 66 tons of bombs. Collectively, they claimed five hits on battleships and six on cruisers, with considerable damage probably inflicted on three of the vessels. The reality fell far short of these optimistic claims. In fact, for the effort expended, the net result of the day's operations was abysmal – the cruiser *Ajax* slightly damaged by a near miss! The Luftwaffe's '*Wunderbomber*' had totally failed to live up to its reputation on this occasion. Indeed, the Royal Navy's only casualty – the destroyer *Juno* – had fallen victim to Ju 87s. But the Ju 88s were to redeem themselves 24 hours later.

22 May found the four groups of warships ('Forces A to D') still gathered in Cretan waters. Heartened by the Luftwaffe's relatively poor performance the previous day, the Royal Navy had remained on station, determined to frustrate the Axis attempts to follow up the airborne landings on Crete with an invasion by sea. One convoy of small craft crowded with German troops had already been repulsed with heavy losses during the night. Not long after dawn the strengthened 'Force C', now comprising four cruisers, plus destroyers, was caught to the north of Crete by aircraft of I./LG 1 and subjected to the first of a series of sustained attacks lasting nearly three-and-a-half hours in all. Some sources suggest that III./KG 30 was called in from Sicily to add its weight to the assault, which resulted in considerable damage to the cruisers *Naiad* and *Carlisle*.

In the meantime 'Force C' had encountered a second Axis convoy and forced it to turn back. But the warships were now dangerously exposed some 90 miles north of Crete, and the force commander ordered that the pursuit be abandoned and the formation withdraw to the southwest to join up with the main Battle Squadron.

In the afternoon I. and II./LG 1 resumed the attack on the combined British forces in the areas to the west and southwest of Crete. The two battleships of 'Force A' were damaged and the two cruisers of the detached 'Force B' sunk – *Gloucester* in the Kythera Channel and *Fiji* 85 miles to the south of it. The destroyer *Greyhound* also went down close to the *Gloucester*. Many other units, most notably the Ju 87s of *VIII. Fliegerkorps*, had played a major part in the day-long assault, but Oberst Knust, with his two *Gruppen* having flown 84 individual sorties, had no hesitation in claiming credit for all three sinkings in that evening's report to *Korps* HQ. Two of his Ju 88s had been lost to naval anti-aircraft fire, a third destroyed in a crash and two others damaged.

III./KG 30's '4D+LT' is refuelled and readied for another mission

Irrespective of who had actually sent the three warships to the bottom, the Luftwaffe had achieved its object. Short of both fuel and anti-aircraft ammunition, the Royal Navy vessels were forced to retire to Alexandria some 420 miles away to the south. But another battle squadron, built around the aircraft carrier *Formidable* and comprising two battleships, two cruisers and nine destroyers, returned to the area during the night of 25/26 May to bombard the island of Scarpanto, east of Crete. Many Axis aircraft were based on the island, and it was hoped that if their operations could be disrupted, it would bring some desperately needed relief to the hard-pressed troops on Crete. Records would seem to indicate, however, that just one aircraft was destroyed on the ground and nine others damaged.

And, inevitably, the Royal Navy task force was quickly located by air reconnaissance the next morning as it was withdrawing. For nine hours the vessels were subjected to attack. I./LG 1 kept up a continual assault for six of those hours, sending its aircraft out in *Ketten* of threes commencing at 0940 hrs. In mid-afternoon I./LG 1 was relieved by the aircraft of II. *Gruppe*, which continued the aerial onslaught for a further three hours. Despite this all-out effort no ships were sunk, although the *Formidable*, battleship *Barham*, cruiser *Orion* and destroyer *Nubian* all suffered damage to varying degree (some of the worst being inflicted by the Ju 87s).

Throughout the day only two Ju 88s were lost, both being claimed by Fulmars launched by *Formidable*. One Junkers exploded in mid-air after coming under attack, while the other was forced to ditch, but not before the rear-gunner had hit the engine of the Fulmar on its tail. The two machines went into the water only some 200 yards apart, and both crews were quickly picked up by the destroyer *Hereward*.

27 May again found the machines of I. and II./LG 1 out hunting for units of the Royal Navy to the south and east of Crete. Among the vessels sighted was the fast minelayer *Abdiel*, hastening back to Alexandria after one of its many audacious night supply runs to Crete. The 2650-ton minelayer escaped unscathed, but the destroyer *Nizam* was hit and further damage was inflicted on the battleship *Barham*, which had one of its main turrets put out of action. During the afternoon, a formation of six Ju 88s had the misfortune to run into three RAF fighters – two Hurricanes and a Blenheim – flying north from Africa to attack the Ju 52/3m transports still pouring supplies into Crete. The three British machines each claimed a Junkers destroyed. In fact only one bomber went down.

It was to be the last Ju 88 loss of the campaign, for at about the same time as Leutnant Hans-Georg Freysoldt's 'L1+EW' disappeared beneath the waves south of Crete, the decision was being made to evacuate the island. Once again the Royal Navy was to come to the rescue of the beleaguered army. There were 32,000 troops to be taken off Crete and only four points of embarkation – the harbour of Heraklion on the north coast, and the tiny fishing villages of Sphakia, Tymbaki and Plaka Bay to south and east. The problem was that only at Heraklion, which was in imminent danger of capture, were there any port facilities. The other three locations would involve lifting men from open beaches.

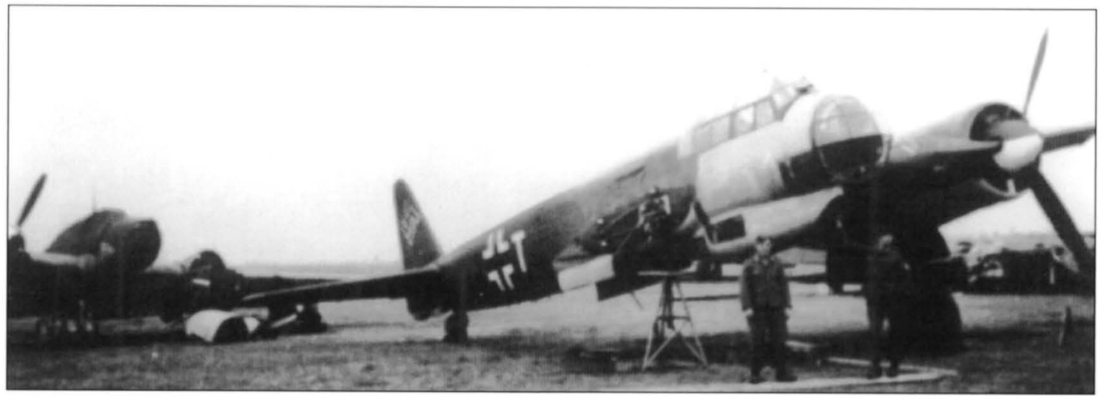
Furthermore, because of Axis air superiority over Crete, the plan was to evacuate troops only between the hours of midnight and 0300 hrs. Naval ships would sorely need the few precious hours before and after these times to give them a chance to approach the beaches and then get away under the cover of darkness. Even so, it would be a risky venture.

The three cruisers and six destroyers of 'Force B' sailed from Alexandria for Heraklion at 0600 hrs on 28 May. During the afternoon, while negotiating the Kaso Strait to the east of Crete, the vessels were attacked by aircraft of II./LG 1, but apparently without any significant results (slight damage being reported to two ships). Meanwhile, I. *Gruppe* had raided Heraklion itself, claiming the sinking of the Greek freighter *Georgos*. At 0320 hrs on the morning of 29 May 'Force B' left Heraklion, having taken on board the port's entire garrison of some 4000 men. But it was already daylight when the ships turned south for the return run through the Kaso Strait to the open sea beyond.

For the next eight hours or more 'Force B' was subjected to near constant dive-bombing attack, the Ju 88s of II./LG 1 from Eleusis alternating with the Ju 87 *Gruppen* operating from nearby Scarpanto on the eastern side of the strait. The Stukas were credited with sinking the destroyer *Hereward*, but it was a crew from LG 1 that claimed a hit on the 5450-ton cruiser *Dido*, putting one of its forward turrets out of action. Although no bombers were lost in these operations, a lone reconnaissance Ju 88 of 2.(F)/123 that had been shadowing 'Force B' was shot down by RAF aircraft from North Africa.

Shortly before midnight on 29 May, 'Force D', comprising four cruisers, three destroyers and a fast naval transport, arrived off the tiny harbour of Sphakia on the south coast of Crete. When the vessels left some hours later, they took with them over 6000 troops. But the formation could not escape the patrolling Ju 88s of LG 1, which discovered the warships just after 0930 hrs on 30 May. Within minutes they had dive-bombed the ships, hitting the 6980-ton Australian cruiser HMAS *Perth*.

That same afternoon three machines of II./LG 1 also damaged the 1690-ton *Kelvin*, one of four destroyers heading north towards Sphakia



Aircraft 'L1+TH' of 1./LG 1 perches forlornly on a trestle as it awaits a replacement starboard wing and engine. This photograph was taken at Tanagra, in Greece – possibly the site of a repair and maintenance unit (note the sorry looking Bf 110 on the left). One source has suggested that the Ju 88 is in the process of being given a coat of overall desert tan camouflage paint. But refer back to the planview shot of the Ju 88 on page 22. This is exactly the area of forward fuselage covered by that machine's Balkan campaign markings on another rescue mission. *Kelvin* was the second of this little group forced to turn back (the *Kandahar* having suffered a mechanical fault some three hours earlier). The remaining two destroyers got to Sphakia, took on board more than 1500 troops, and by 0230 hrs on 31 May were ready to run the gauntlet back to Alexandria. They both made it, but not without incident. At 0850 hrs the two warships were attacked by a dozen Ju 88s of II./LG 1. *Napier* was near-missed and damaged, but the vessel's anti-aircraft gunners claimed one of the attackers shot down. Three of the RAF aircraft sent to the destroyers' aid also claimed a bomber apiece. But only one Ju 88 was lost, having been written-off after a forced-landing at Heraklion on Crete due, reportedly, to anti-aircraft damage.

During the night of 31 May/1 June, 'Force D' made the last run to Sphakia. It returned to Alexandria with 4000 men, but another 12,000 or more had to be left behind on Crete. The Royal Navy had done its best, but Axis air power had simply proved too overwhelming. Even on this final trip, the Ju 88s of LG 1 were on the prowl. Machines of I. *Gruppe* sighted the force shortly after dawn, but were driven off by a trio of RAF Beaufighters. To provide the returning ships with additional support, the anti-aircraft cruisers *Calcutta* and *Coventry* had sailed from Alexandria to meet up with them. However, before making the rendezvous, they were themselves discovered by two machines of II./LG 1.

Diving out of the sun, the lead machine – piloted by Hauptmann Joachim Helbig – narrowly missed *Coventry*, but Leutnant Hans Sauer's bombs hit *Calcutta* with devastating effect. The gallant warship's luck had finally run out, and it sank within minutes with heavy loss of life. Landing back at Eleusis, the two crews claimed the sinking of a destroyer.

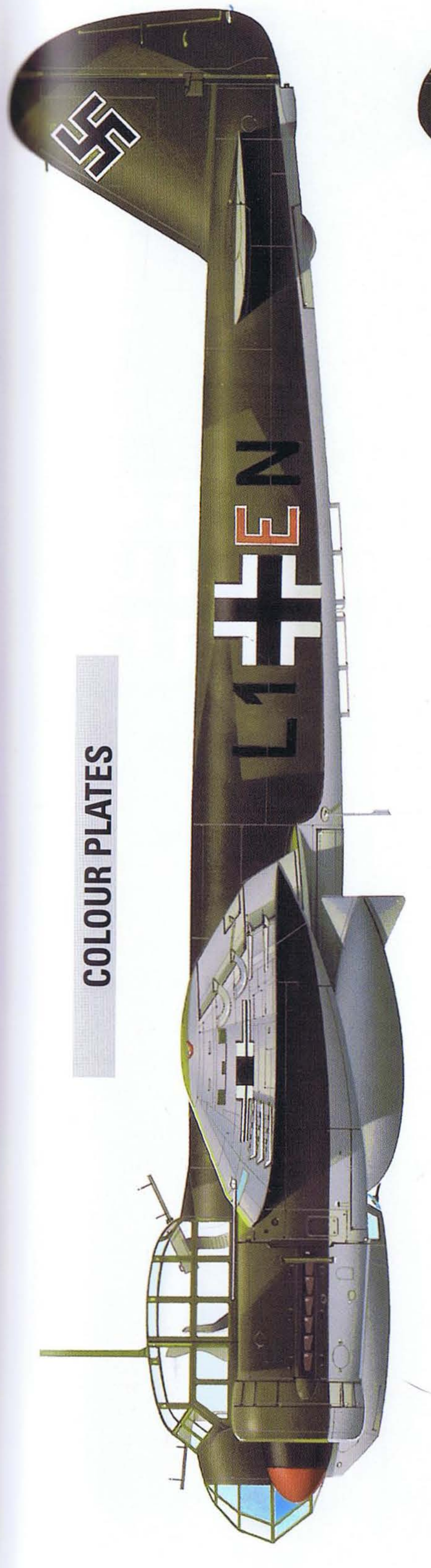
Calcutta was the Royal Navy's last loss of the campaign. Aircraft of LG 1 flew a series of overlapping patrols throughout the daylight hours of 1 June scouring the waters between Crete and Egypt, but not a single vessel was sighted. 'It was as if the sea had been swept clean', remarked one Ju 88 pilot.

The end of the Balkan and Cretan campaigns also marked the close of the most concentrated and successful period of operations the Ju 88 was to experience in the Mediterranean conflict. The Luftwaffe's *'Wunderbomber'* would continue to provide a presence in the theatre for the next three years. Its numbers would even increase as other *Gruppen* came and went. *Lehrgeschwader* 1 remained the one constant throughout. But it, like all the other units that operated in this theatre, would find itself pushed gradually but inexorably on to the defensive.

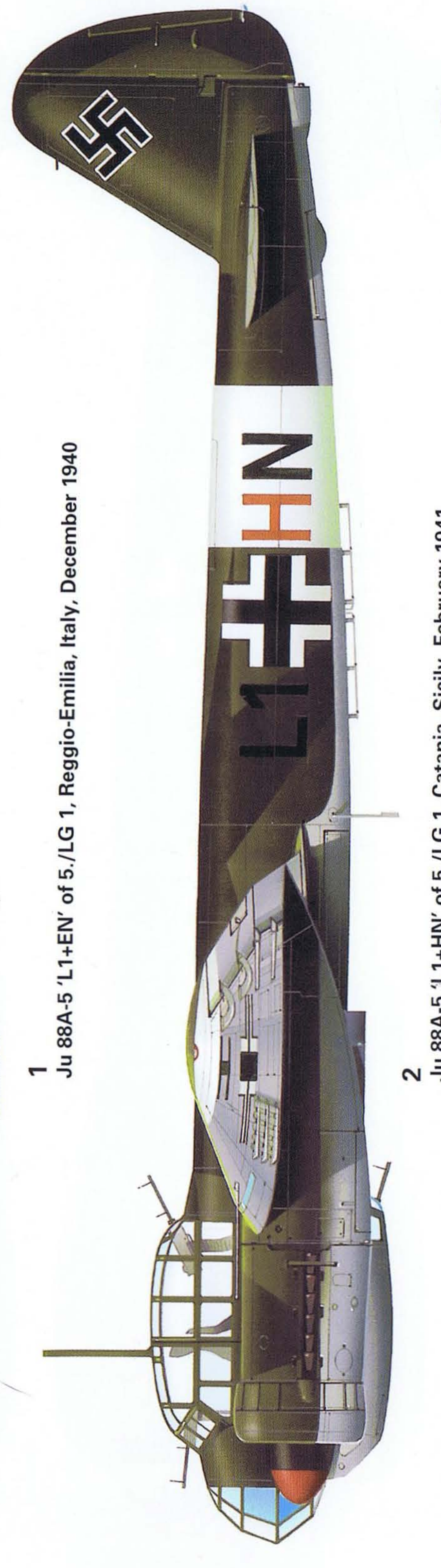
There were still significant individual successes to be had in the months to come, but rarely again would the Ju 88 bask in the near undisputed mastery of the skies that it had enjoyed in the spring of 1941.

The tiny harbour and beach at Sphakia, where the last act of the evacuation of Crete was played out

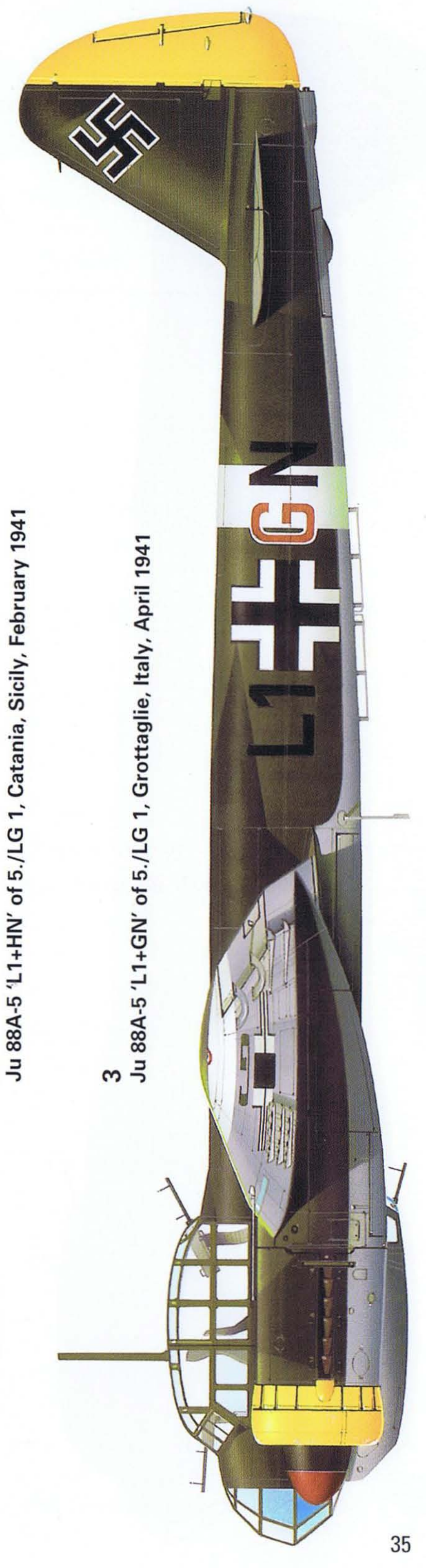
COLOUR PLATES



1
Ju 88A-5 'L1+EN' of 5./LG 1, Reggio-Emilia, Italy, December 1940



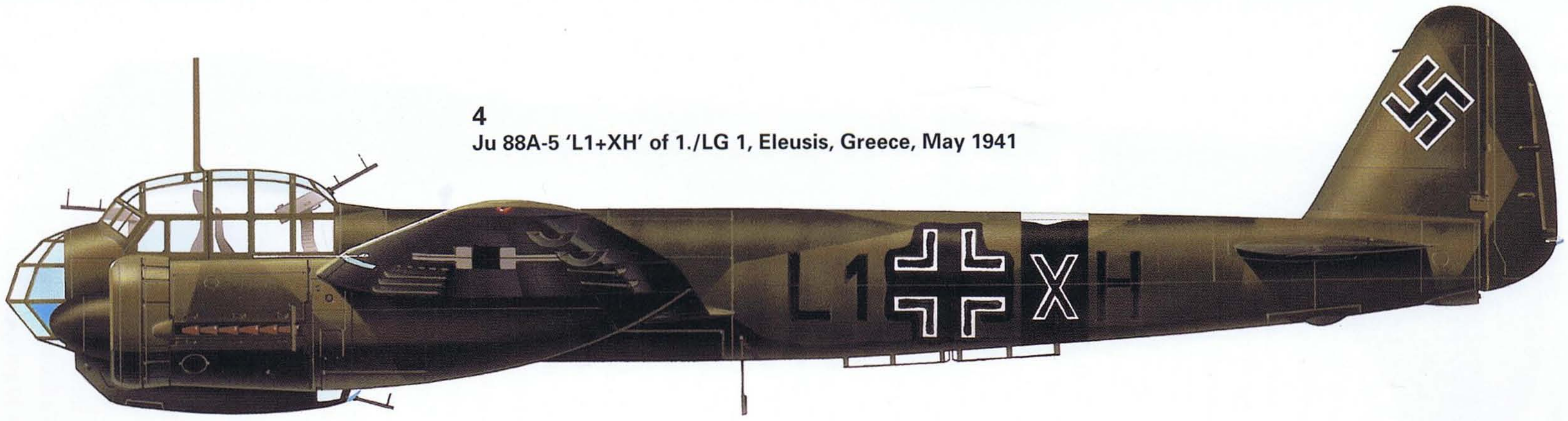
2
Ju 88A-5 'L1+HN' of 5./LG 1, Catania, Sicily, February 1941



3
Ju 88A-5 'L1+GN' of 5./LG 1, Grottaglie, Italy, April 1941

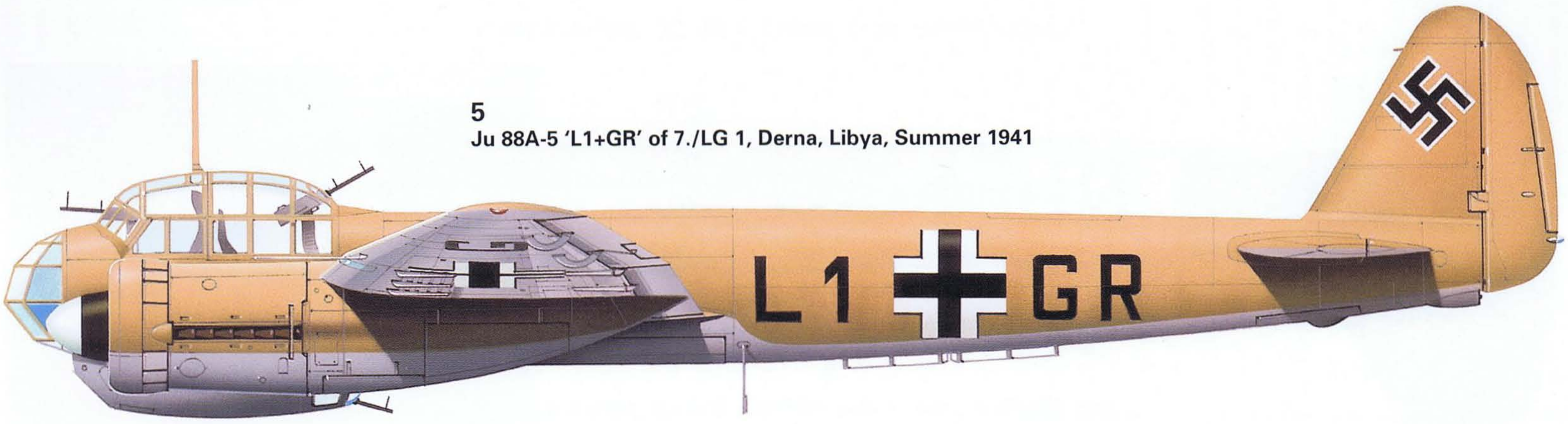
4

Ju 88A-5 'L1+XH' of 1./LG 1, Eleusis, Greece, May 1941



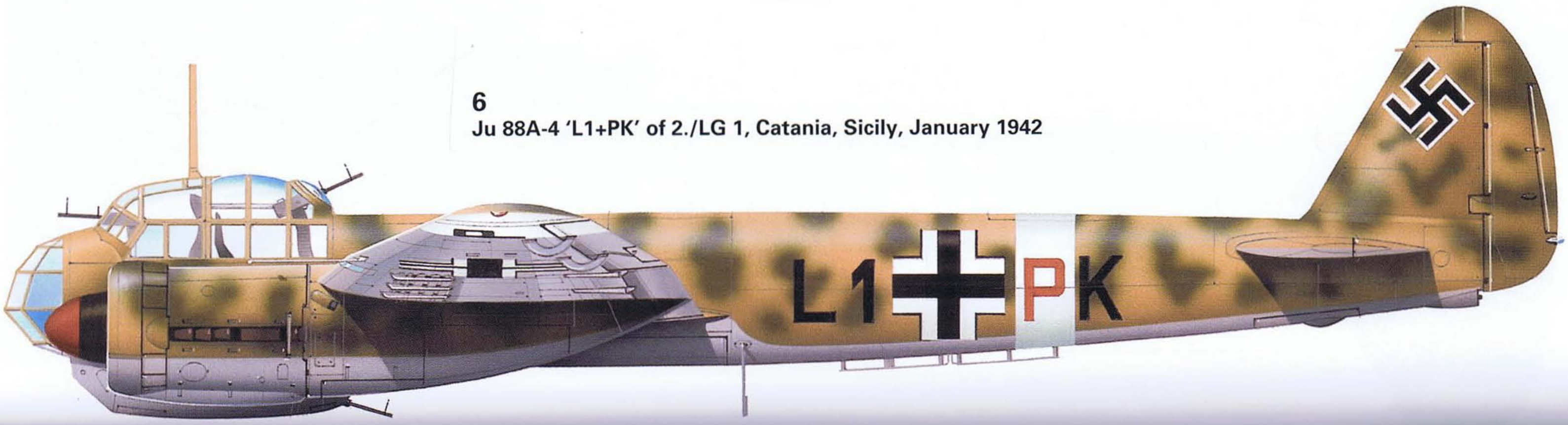
5

Ju 88A-5 'L1+GR' of 7./LG 1, Derna, Libya, Summer 1941



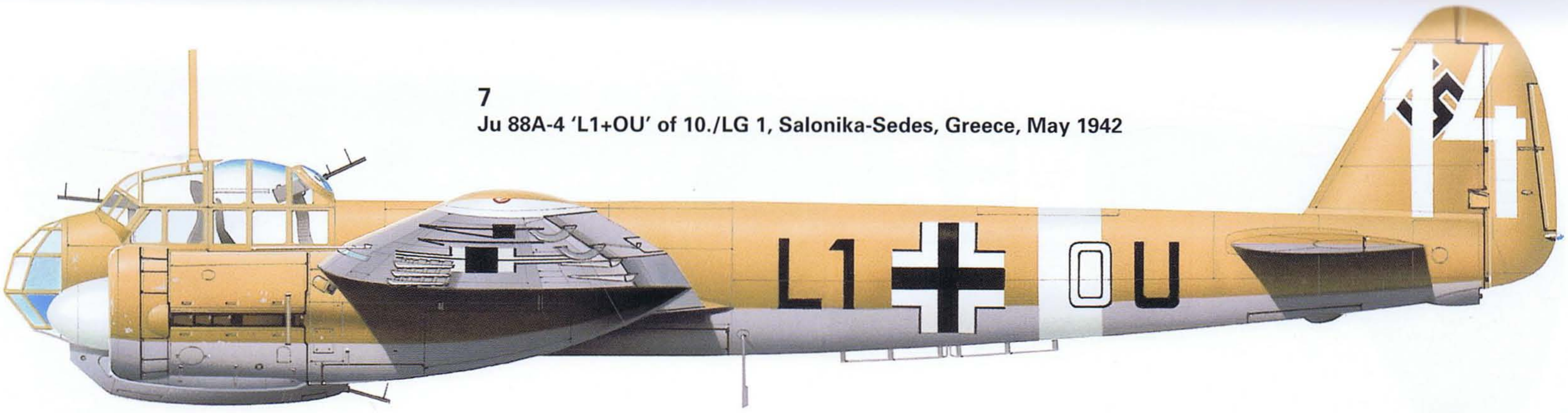
6

Ju 88A-4 'L1+PK' of 2./LG 1, Catania, Sicily, January 1942



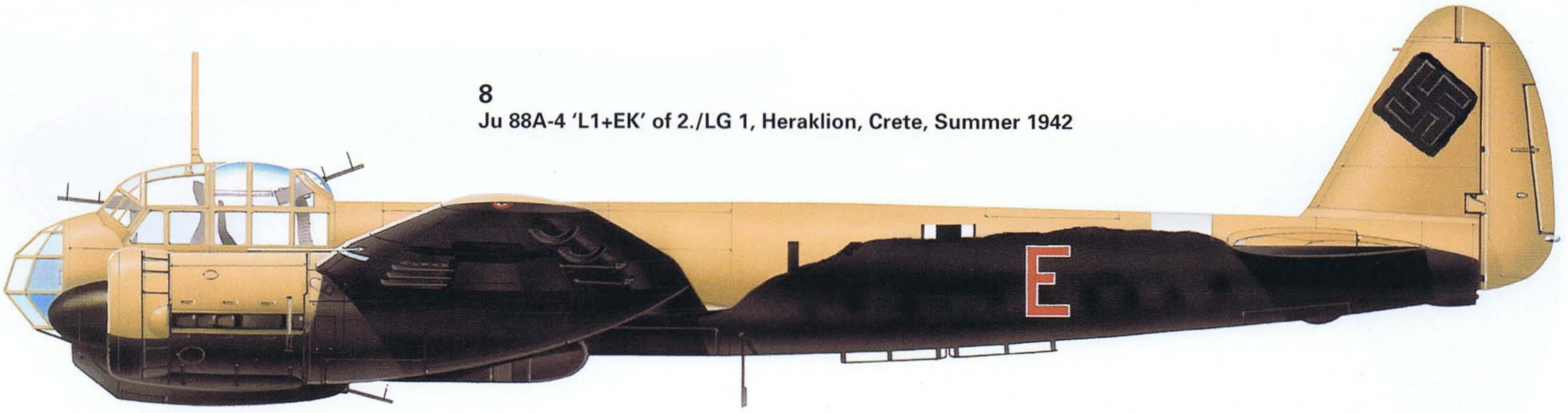
7

Ju 88A-4 'L1+OU' of 10./LG 1, Salonika-Sedes, Greece, May 1942



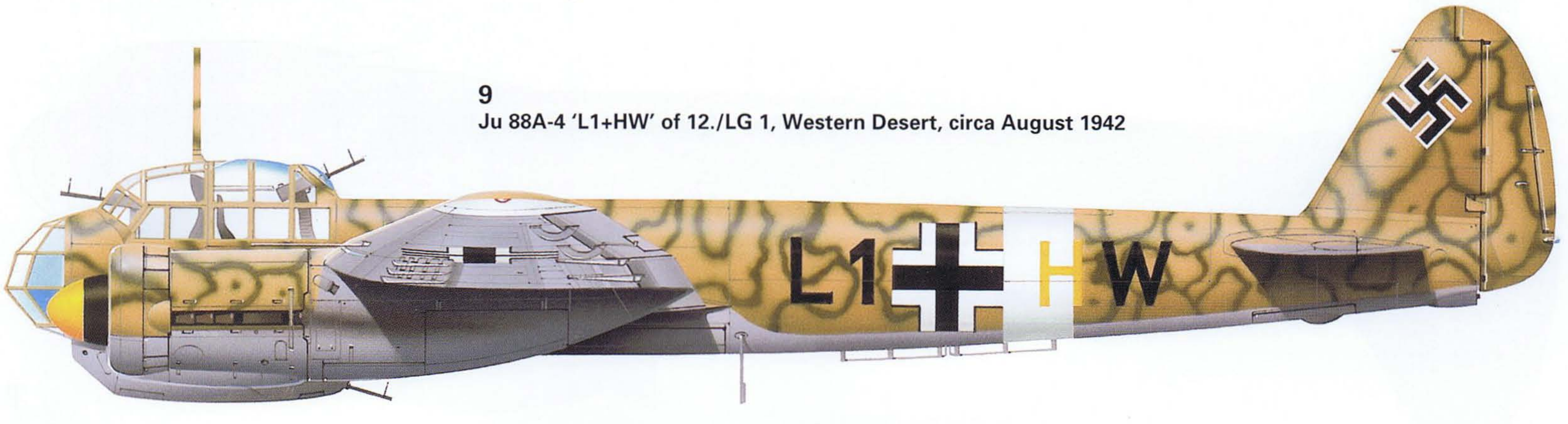
8

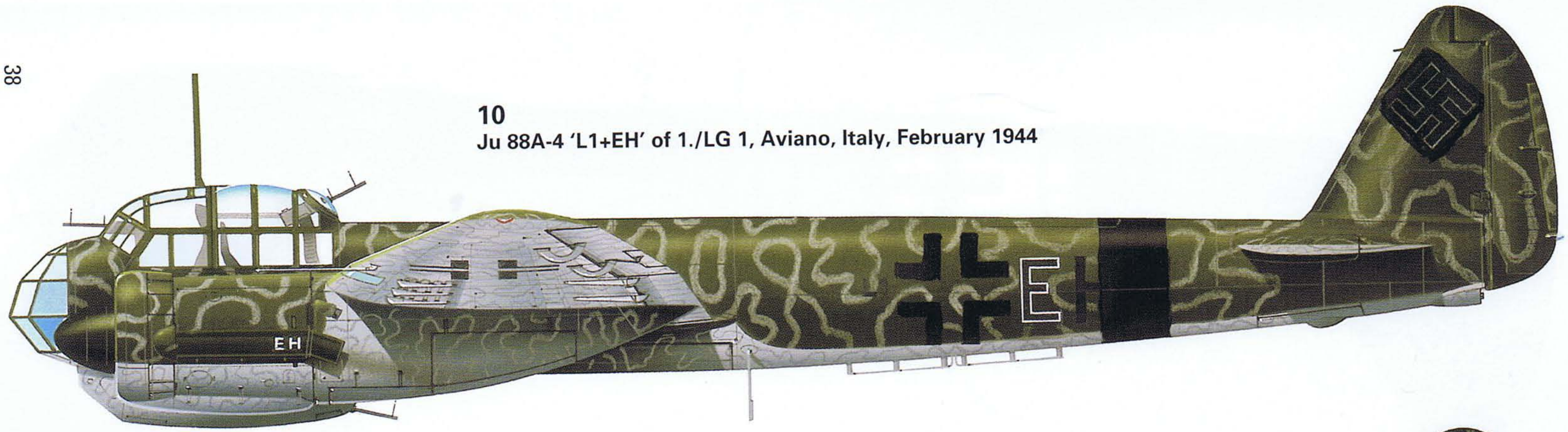
Ju 88A-4 'L1+EK' of 2./LG 1, Heraklion, Crete, Summer 1942



9

Ju 88A-4 'L1+HW' of 12./LG 1, Western Desert, circa August 1942





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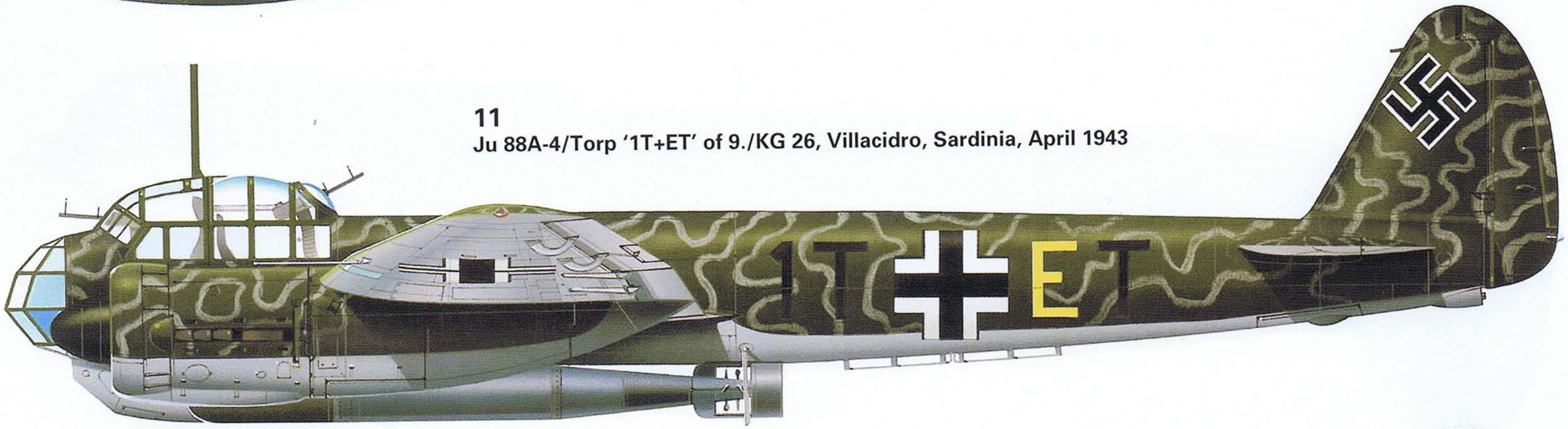
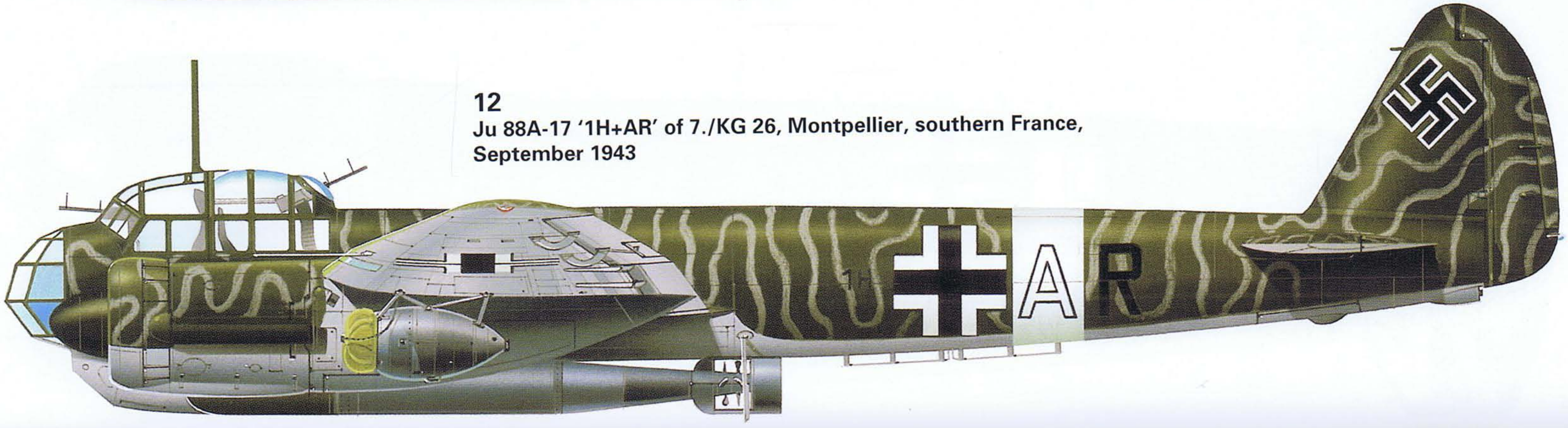
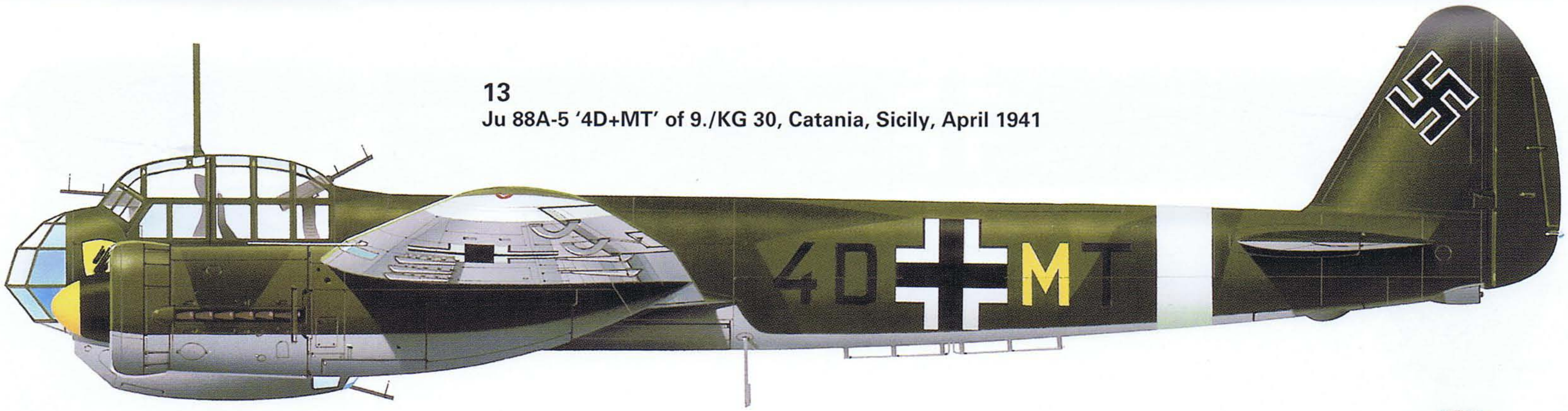
Ju 88A-4 'L1+EH' of 1./LG 1, Aviano, Italy, February 1944



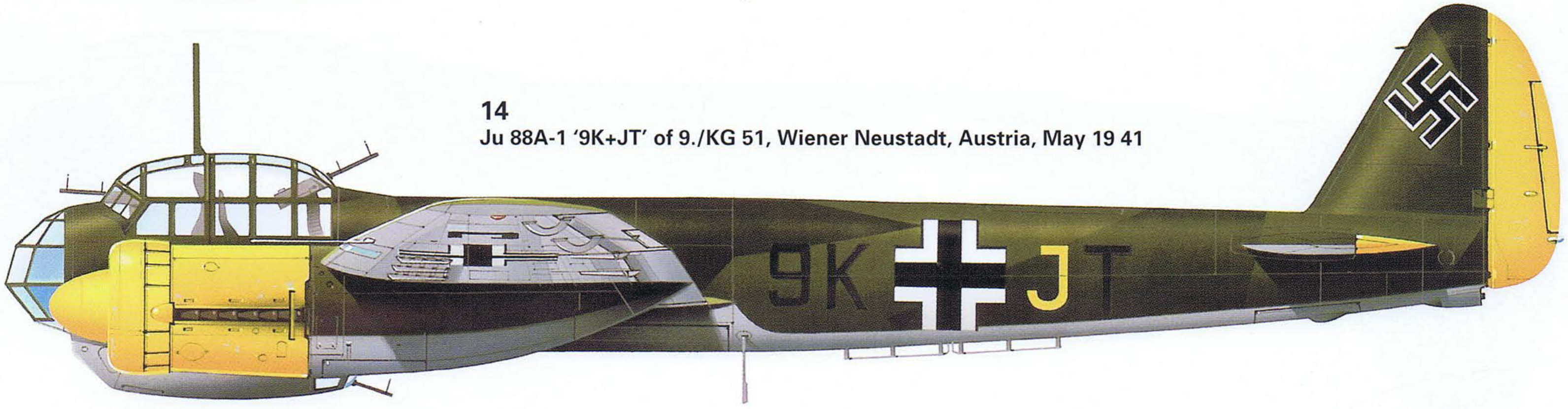
11
Ju 88A-4/Torp '1T+ET' of 9./KG 26, Villacidro, Sardinia, April 1943



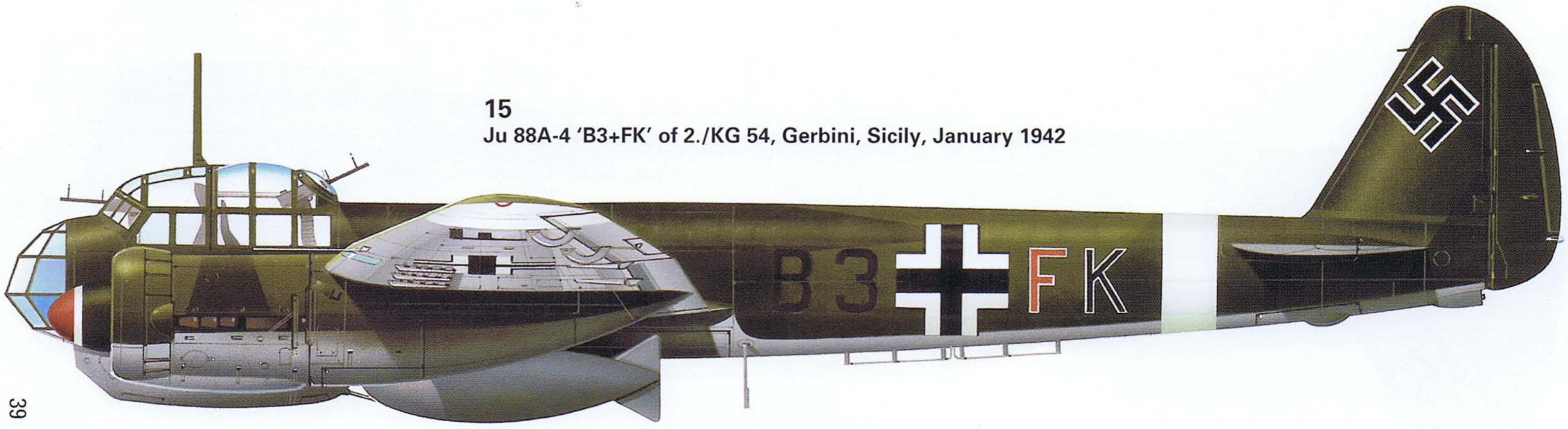
12
Ju 88A-17 '1H+AR' of 7./KG 26, Montpellier, southern France, September 1943



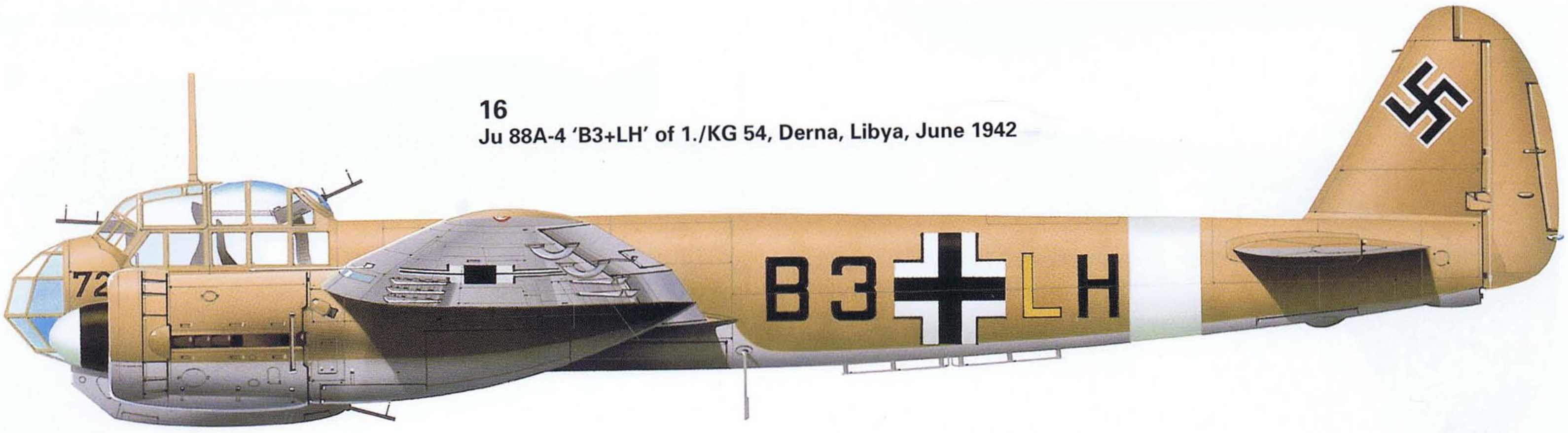
13
Ju 88A-5 '4D+MT' of 9./KG 30, Catania, Sicily, April 1941



14
Ju 88A-1 '9K+JT' of 9./KG 51, Wiener Neustadt, Austria, May 19 41



15
Ju 88A-4 'B3+FK' of 2./KG 54, Gerbini, Sicily, January 1942



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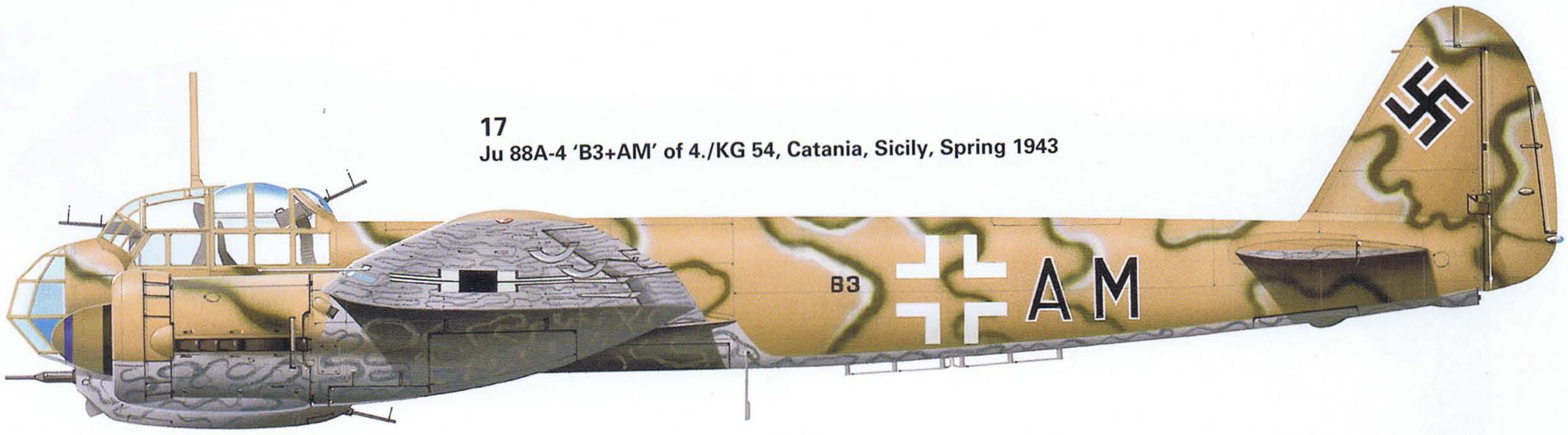
Ju 88A-4 'B3+LH' of 1./KG 54, Derna, Libya, June 1942



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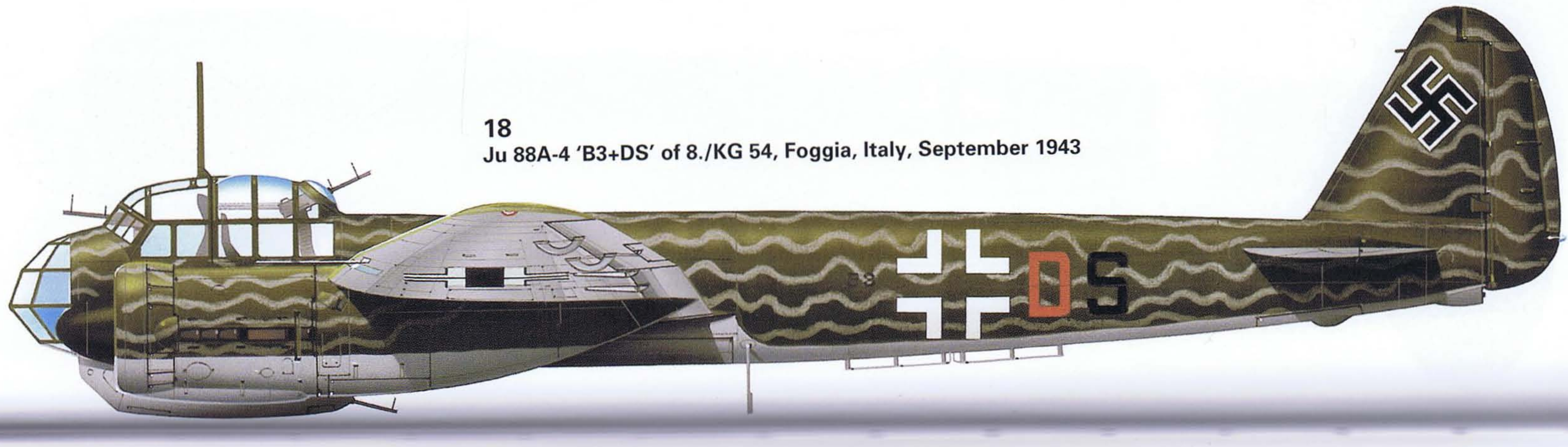
Ju 88A-4 'B3+AM' of 4./KG 54, Catania, Sicily, Spring 1943



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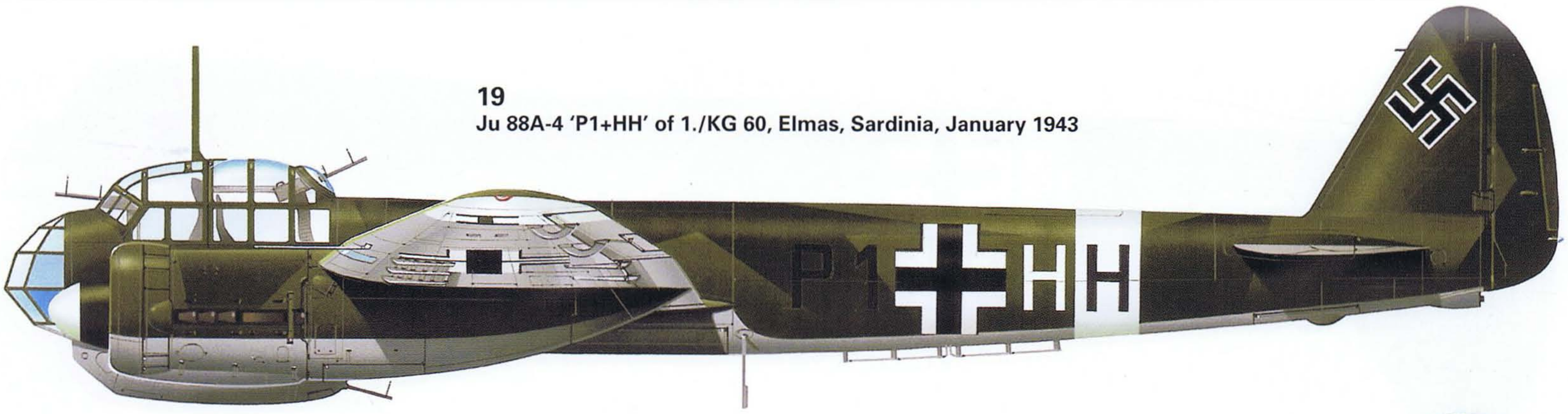
Ju 88A-4 'B3+DS' of 8./KG 54, Foggia, Italy, September 1943



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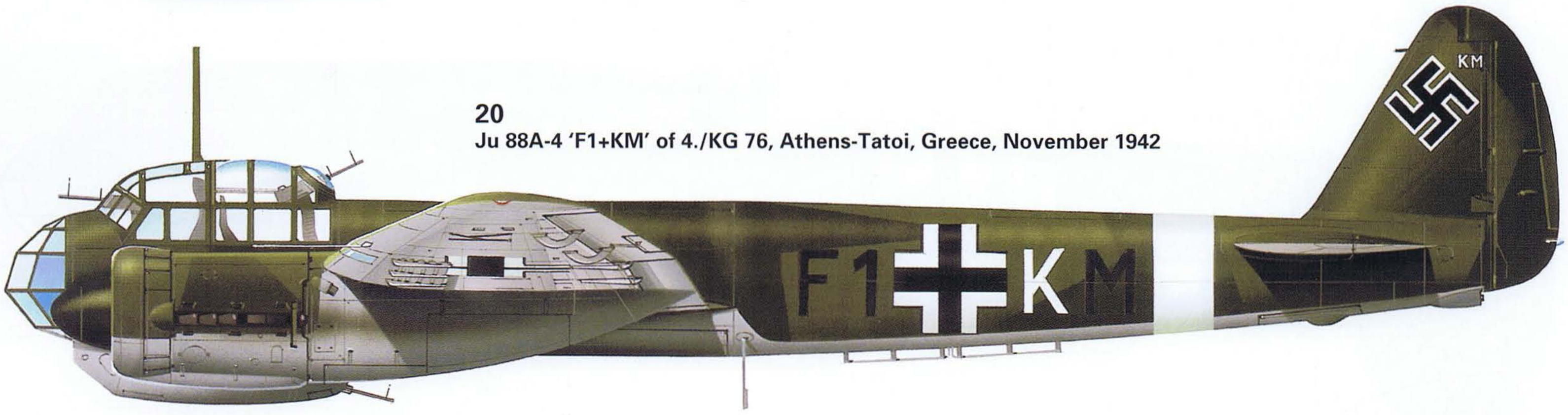
Ju 88A-4 'P1+HH' of 1./KG 60, Elmas, Sardinia, January 1943



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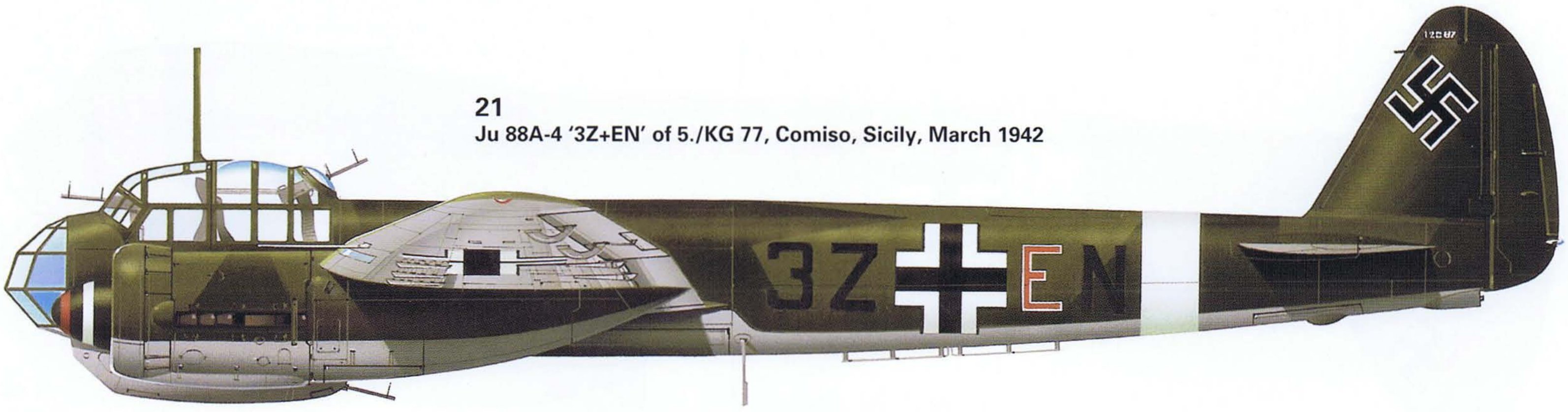
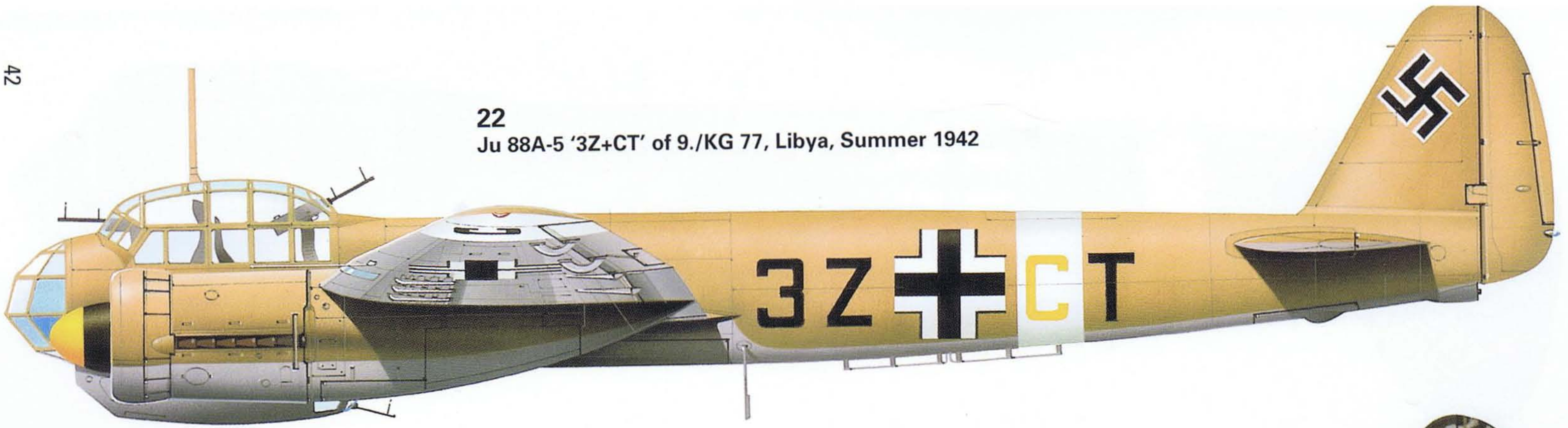
Ju 88A-4 'F1+KM' of 4./KG 76, Athens-Tatoi, Greece, November 1942



21
Ju 88A-4 '3Z+EN' of 5./KG 77, Comiso, Sicily, March 1942

22

Ju 88A-5 '3Z+CT' of 9./KG 77, Libya, Summer 1942



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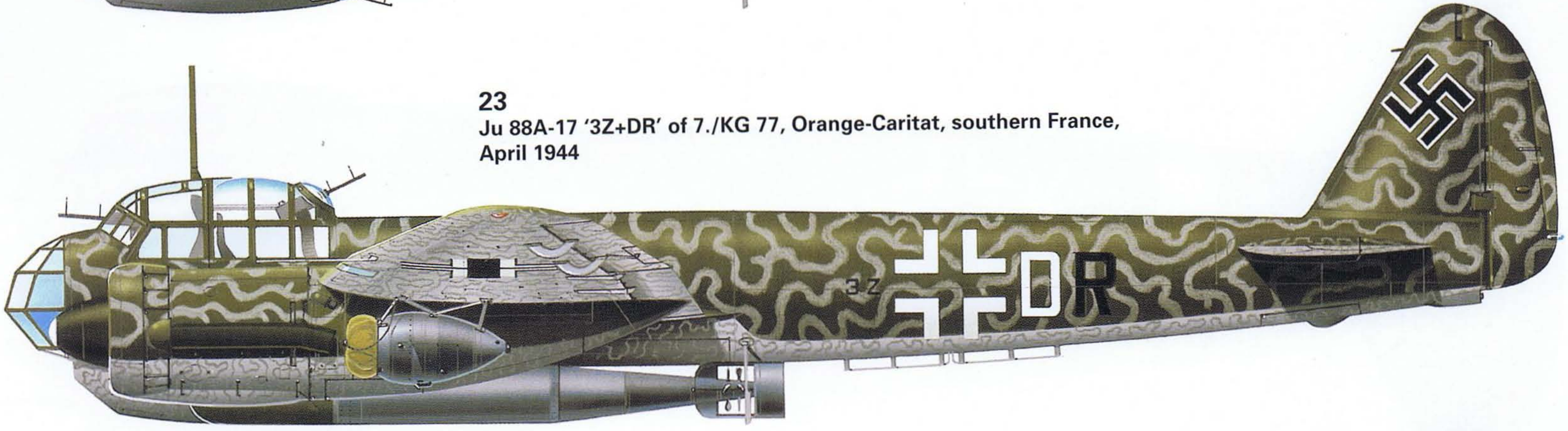
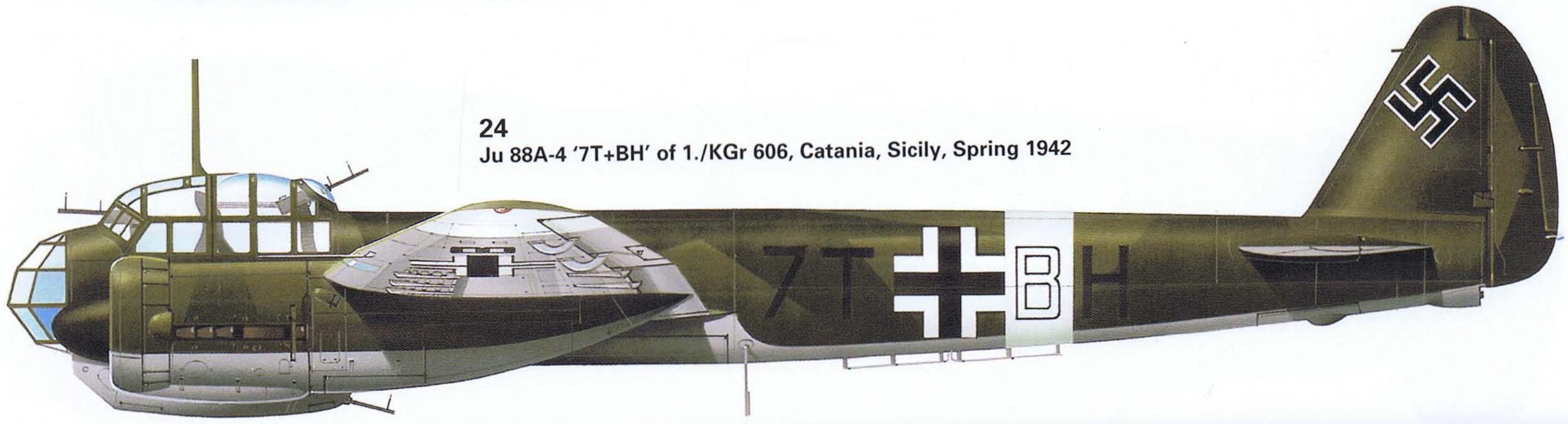
Ju 88A-17 '3Z+DR' of 7./KG 77, Orange-Caritat, southern France, April 1944



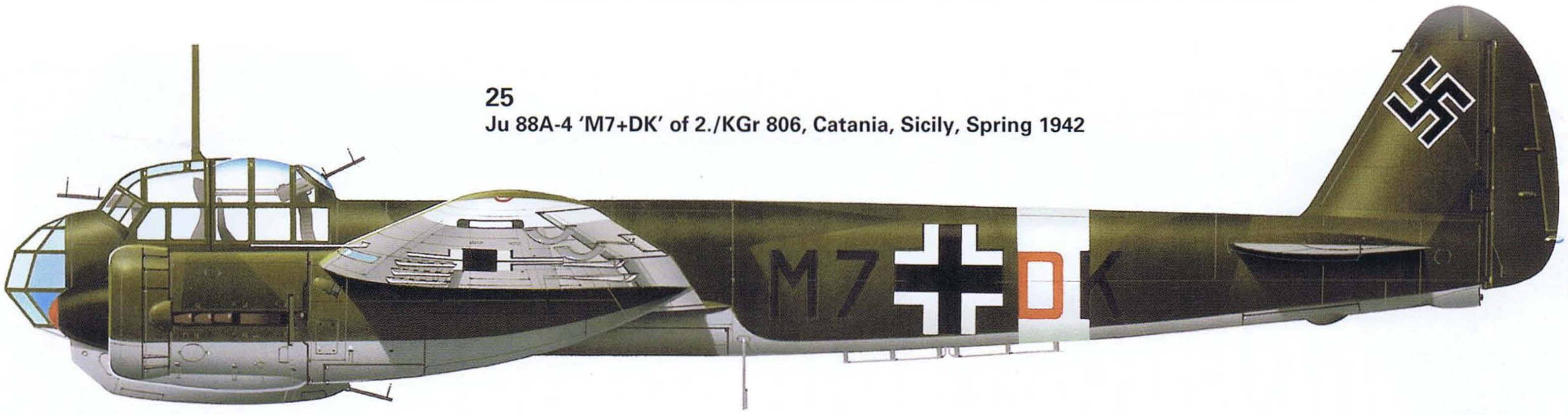
24

Ju 88A-4 '7T+BH' of 1./KGr 606, Catania, Sicily, Spring 1942



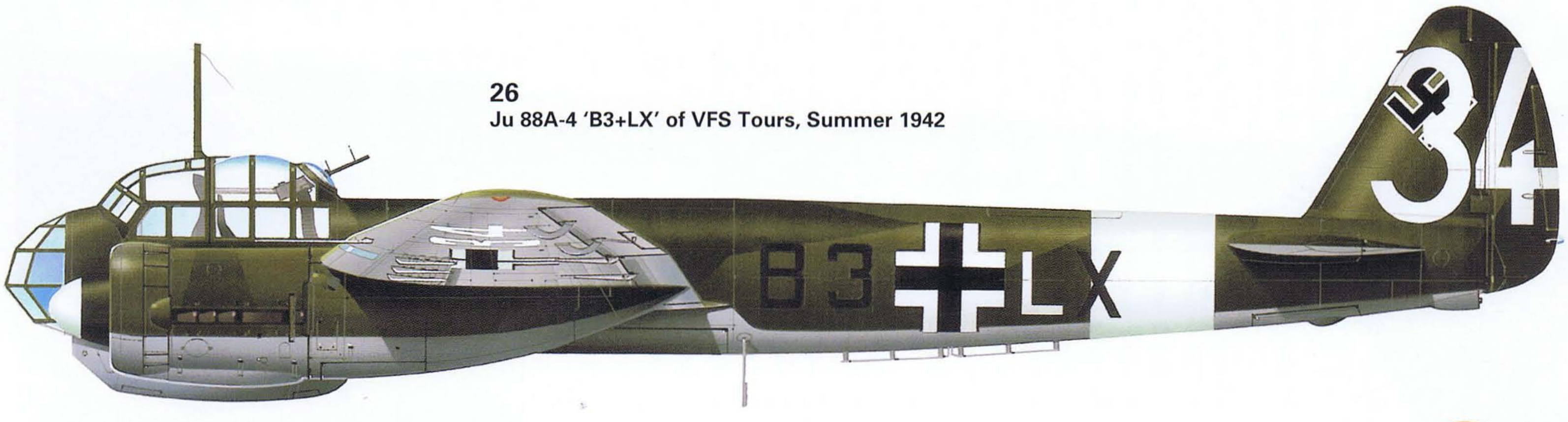
25

Ju 88A-4 'M7+DK' of 2./KGr 806, Catania, Sicily, Spring 1942



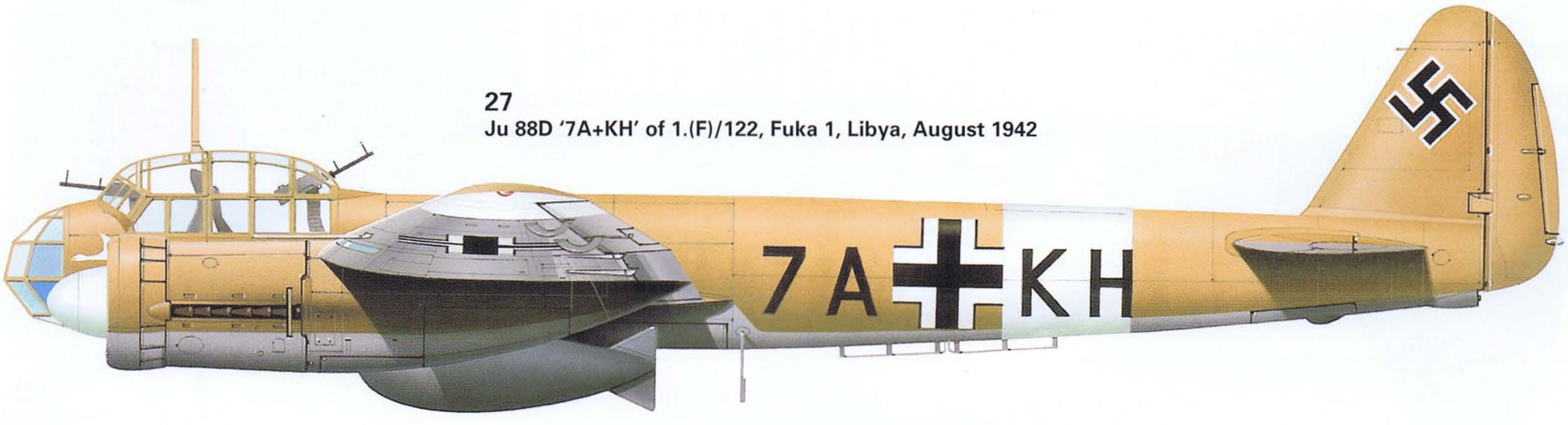
26

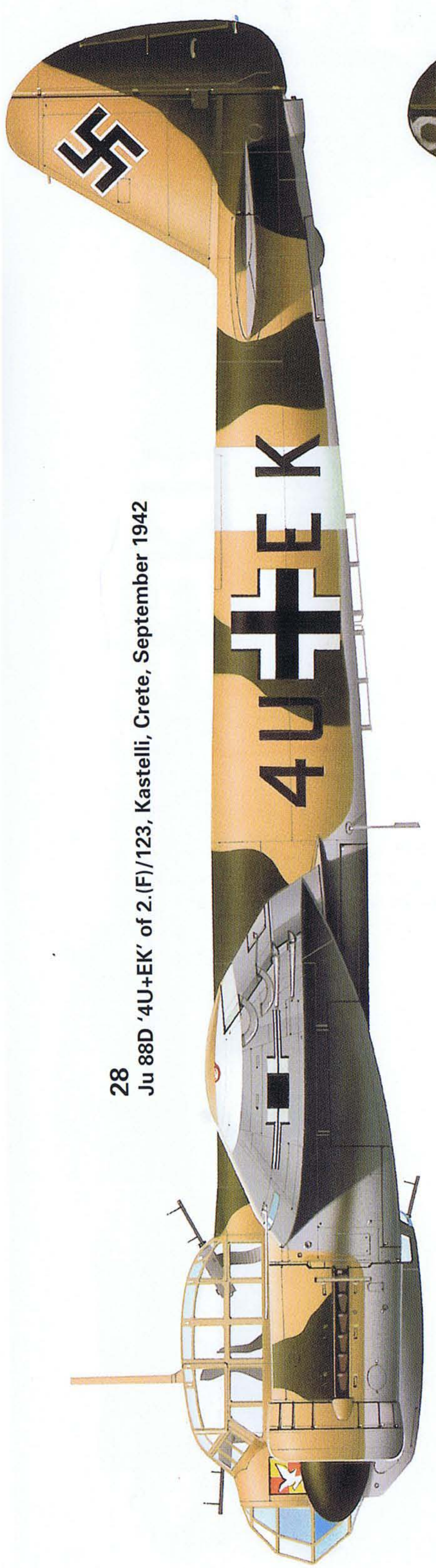
Ju 88A-4 'B3+LX' of VFS Tours, Summer 1942



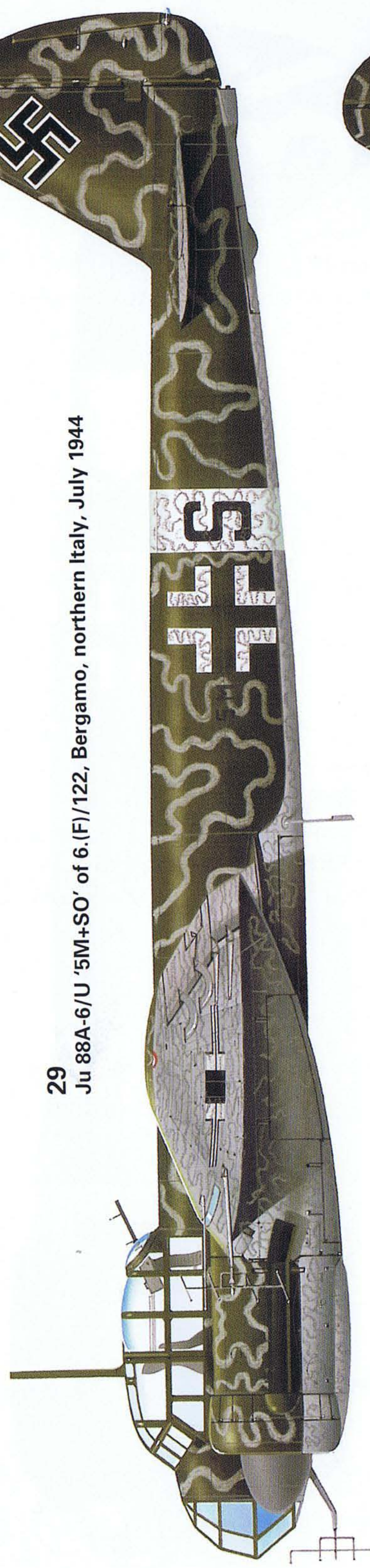
27

Ju 88D '7A+KH' of 1.(F)/122, Fuka 1, Libya, August 1942

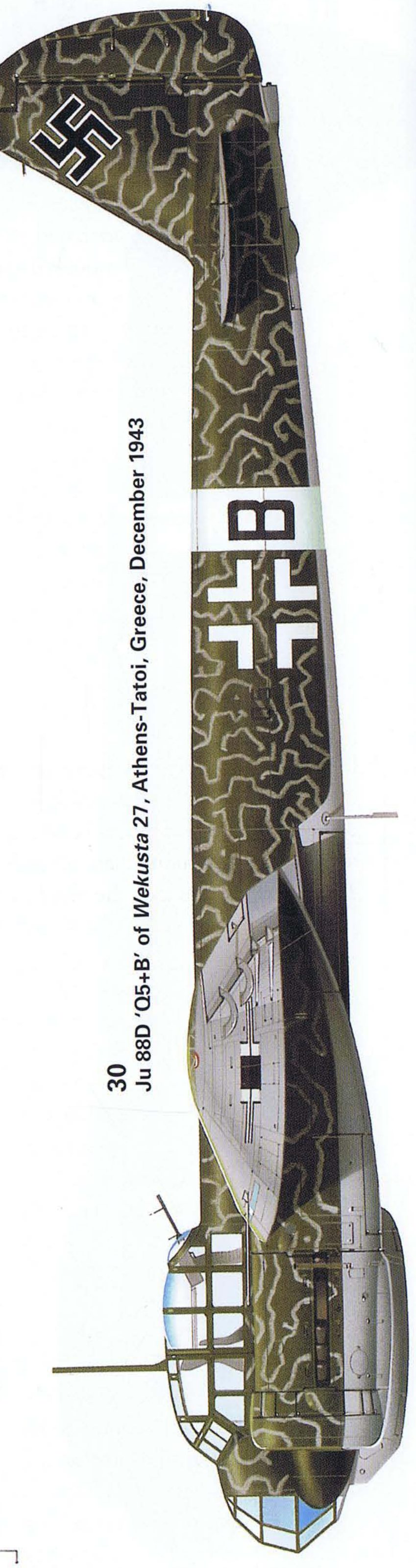




28
Ju 88D '4U+EK' of 2.(F)/123, Kastelli, Crete, September 1942



29
Ju 88A-6/U '5M+SO' of 6.(F)/122, Bergamo, northern Italy, July 1944



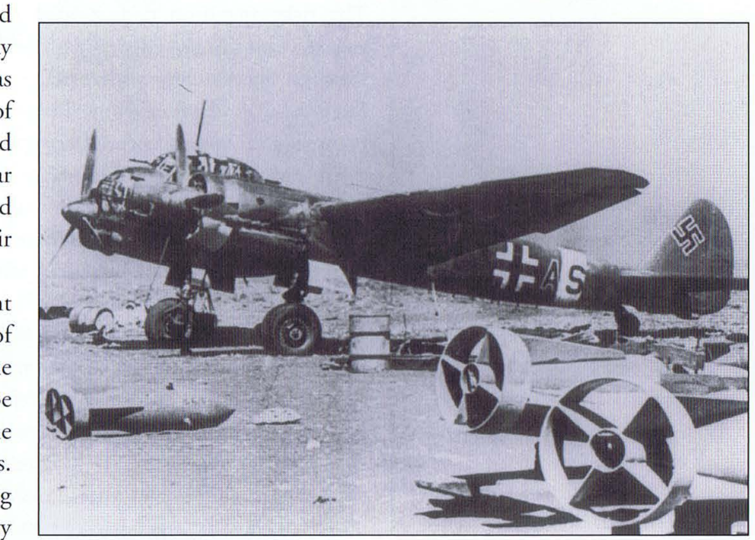
30
Ju 88D 'Q5+B' of *Wekusta* 27, Athens-Tatoi, Greece, December 1943

MALTA OR CAIRO?

While the world was following the events in Yugoslavia, Greece and Crete, it was still very much business as usual for the Ju 88 *Gruppen* based on Sicily. II./LG 1 (until its transfer to Eleusis) and III./KG 30 mounted sporadic raids on Malta and III./LG 1 was still engaged in the unremitting task of protecting Axis convoys ferrying men and materials across the Mediterranean to North Africa.

Here, developments were also taking place. With British forces in Libya weakened by the diversion of so many troops to Greece, Rommel's 'reconnaissance' eastwards along the coastal highway was by now in full swing. The harbour town of Tobruk had been bypassed and its garrison cut off by mid-April. And although Berlin was still urging caution on their firebrand general, recommending that he stop and consolidate along a line at Sollum on the Libyan-Egyptian border, Rommel was at least being given some additional air support. The nine machines of 8./LG 1 that transferred from Catania to Benghazi-Benina on 18 April were the first Ju 88s to be subordinated to the *Fliegerführer Afrika*, and thus the first to be directly engaged in the desert war.

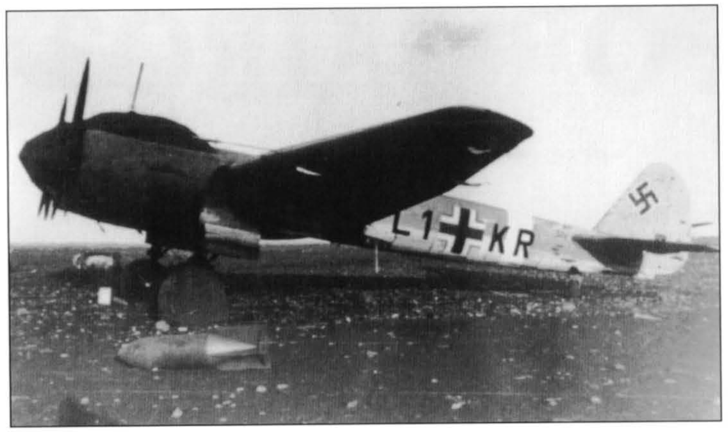
The 20 Junkers that raided Tobruk the following day, however, were aircraft of III./KG 30 flying across from Sicily. Two machines of 8. *Staffel* failed to return from this operation, one of them being '4D+KS' flown by *Staffelkapitän* Hauptmann Alfred Neumann. On 21 April 8./LG 1, already down to just seven serviceable machines, moved forward from Benghazi to Derna, little more than 60 miles short of the Tobruk perimeter. Twenty-four hours later the unit lost one of those seven during an armed reconnaissance of Tobruk. References differ as to how the casualty came about, some records indicating that the Ju 88 fell foul of patrolling fighters (Fulmars of the Fleet Air Arm), while other sources suggest that it was brought down by an accurate burst of anti-aircraft fire.



In April 1941 8./LG 1 became the first Ju 88 unit to be based in North Africa. The small fairing behind the nose glazing reveals that this machine – 'L1+AS' – is another of LG 1's A-6s. It is presumably a replacement for the earlier 'AS' (a Ju 88A-5) in which *Staffelkapitän* Hauptmann Wilhelm Dürbeck was killed over Malta on 19 January (see text on page 9), but is it also the mount of the current *Staffelkapitän* and future Swords winner Oberleutnant Hermann Hogeback?

The town's flak defences would play a vital role in the epic 240-day siege that the Tobruk garrison was about to endure. The gunners of the six anti-aircraft batteries waged a constant, almost personal, war against the Luftwaffe, and developed a love-hate relationship with their opponents in the process.

The Ju 88s were frequently sent over Tobruk in individual *Ketten* of threes. One particular target was the supply dumps, which seemed to be bombed every morning just as the ration trucks were drawing stores. Convinced that they were dealing with the same three aircraft every



The rest of III./LG 1 joined 8. *Staffel* in Libya in early May. It was not long before the *Gruppe's* aircraft – like 7./LG 1's well wrapped-up 'L1+KR' seen here – began to sport camouflage finishes more suited to the unit's new desert environment

time, the gunners soon christened the trio 'Pip', 'Squeak' and 'Wilfred' after three popular cartoon strip characters of the day.

Similarly, whenever a pair of Ju 88s appeared overhead, they were always 'Mickey' and 'Minnie'. These two were accused of a particularly underhand trick – one would come roaring noisily out of the sun in a shallow dive while the other sneaked in from the opposite direction with its engines just ticking over. It was reckoned that this couple's activities lasted for the best part of two months before finally being brought to a halt when a direct hit took some three feet off the end of one of 'Mickey's' (or was it 'Minnie's'?) wings.

Lastly, any singleton – either a lone bomber carrying out a hit-and-run attack or a solitary reconnaissance snooper – was automatically called 'Jimmy'. On one occasion, 'Jimmy' hit an ammunition dump near the HQ of the 9th Australian Infantry Division, leaving an enormous cloud of smoke and thunderous explosions reverberating throughout the area for hours afterwards.

On 3 May the rest of III./LG 1 joined 8. *Staffel* in North Africa, but not before mounting at least one more raid on Malta. Flown in the early evening of 29 April, this had cost the *Gruppe* a single casualty when 9. *Staffel's* 'L1+BT' was shot down over Valetta, its entire crew bailing out to become prisoners of war. Later that same night the island had also been subjected to an attack in *Gruppe* strength by III./KG 30.

Starting on 4 May, III./LG 1 began a week of sustained bombing raids and armed reconnaissance sweeps in and around Tobruk. While III./LG 1 were thus engaged in the direct support of the desert war, the British were trying to run a convoy of five fast merchantmen, laden with tanks for the Army of the Nile, the length of the Mediterranean from west to east. This risky operation, code-named *Tiger*, was greatly helped by the poor weather conditions. Passing through the Straits of Gibraltar on 6 May, the ships did not come within range of Axis air attack until two days later. Even then, the combination of bad weather and a powerful naval escort prevented the vessels from suffering any appreciable damage. Only one of the five would be lost, and this after hitting a mine off Malta on 9 May.

Two days later still, on 11 May, nearly a dozen Ju 88s of III./LG 1 took off from Derna to attack the remaining ships, which were now reported to be north-northeast of Tobruk. Crews claimed no hits on the vessels and lost one of their number when a 7. *Staffel* machine was involved in a mid-air collision with a defending Fulmar in murky conditions.

III./LG 1 had more success the next day when it returned to Tobruk. Although the crews' primary objective was the town's pumping station, two direct hits were claimed on a small warship anchored in the harbour. This was the Royal Navy's 625-ton river gunboat *Ladybird*, recalled from the China station to take part in the earlier bombardment of Bardia. Just how many Ju 88s targeted the little vessel is no longer clear, but certainly fewer than the *Ladybird's* captain described at the time;

'Some 47 bombers swooped towards us. My chief gunner's mate saw the first aeroplane dropping out of the sunshine, and it laid a stick of bombs so near that the explosions flung the crew on the deck. Then there was a terrific screech, and there came another lot, one of which got us right aft, almost immediately putting the deck under water. Then another bomb got us in the engine room. The ship shivered from stem to stern and was obviously sinking.'

Ladybird went down in a matter of minutes, but a mixed force of British cruisers and destroyers encountered off the coast of Libya the following afternoon (13 May) did not offer such an easy target. Indeed, the *Gruppenstab* of III./LG 1 lost a machine to anti-aircraft fire from the cruiser *Ajax* when 'L1+AD' appeared to take a direct hit in the cockpit while in the middle of its dive.

Throughout the latter half of May 1941, while the fighting raged on and around Crete, III./LG 1 continued to support Rommel's desert advance. Hauptmann Nietsch's III./LG 1 crews also flew a number of convoy escort and maritime reconnaissance missions during this period. Their main target, however, remained the British and Commonwealth ground forces falling back on the Egyptian frontier. They attacked troops and vehicles in the Sollum and Fort Capuzzo areas, and attempted to block the Halfaya Pass. But it was to Tobruk that they returned time and time again. The battered but stubborn garrison was to be a thorn in Rommel's side for the next six months. Successive attempts to take Tobruk by direct land assault all ended in failure, and both the town and harbour would feature large in III./LG 1's activities in the weeks ahead.

Although based in Greece, 1.(F)/121 maintained a permanent presence of four aircraft (on a rotational basis) in North Africa throughout the latter half of 1941. This elaborately camouflaged example has barely made it back from Libya before belly-landing on a Cretan beach. One source states that this is the machine in which future reconnaissance Knight's Cross winner Oberleutnant Alfons Muggenthaler was flying as navigator/observer

FORCE REDEPLOYMENT

Following the successful conclusion of the Cretan campaign early in June, there was a wholesale redeployment of Luftwaffe units in the Mediterranean theatre. Clearly believing his enemy to be on the ropes – an assumption that was, at the time, not too far from the truth – Hitler ordered that pressure be kept up on the British. The OKL (Luftwaffe High Command) therefore transferred *X. Fliegerkorps en bloc* from Sicily to Greece and the Aegean in order to pursue 'operations against England (sic) in the eastern Mediterranean'. Already at Eleusis, I. and II./LG 1 were well placed to carry out such operations. And they were soon joined in Greece by those Ju 88 units still stationed on Sicily – III./KG 30 and the *Korps'* two strategic reconnaissance *Staffeln*, 1.(F)/121 and 2.(F)/123.

The bombers faced a formidable task. Not only were they to sweep the eastern Mediterranean for Allied naval and merchant ships, they were also to attack ports and coastal towns in the area, bomb military installations and RAF airfields in the Nile Delta region and mine strategic harbours and waterways, including the Suez Canal – a tall order for a force of just four *Kampfgruppen* (including the He 111s of II./KG 26) and one, moreover, that could field barely 50 serviceable machines from the outset.

Little time was lost in getting the offensive underway. I. and II./LG 1 flew their first operation (a raid on Alexandria) during the night of 7/8 June. Despite it being a maximum effort – all but two of the 33 serviceable aircraft despatched reportedly arriving over the target area – the bombing had little effect. And although no Ju 88s were lost, five suffered damage when landing back at either Eleusis or Rhodes-Gadurra.

In the months ahead it became not uncommon for crews of I. and II./LG 1 to put down on Italian-held Rhodes after a foray deep into the eastern Mediterranean. This was ostensibly to top up fuel tanks before the long overwater flight back to base in Greece (and later Crete). But there was another reason why the Ju 88s liked to drop in at Rhodes 'for safety's sake'. Provisions at their own recently-occupied airfields were not exactly abundant, and the long-established Italian airfield at Gadurra, on Rhodes, could nearly always be relied upon to come up with some additional delicacies that could either be consumed on the spot or taken back to base to augment and add variety to their own meagre mess tables.

The following night (8/9 June), II./LG 1 ventured further east still with a raid on Haifa, in Palestine, during which Hauptmann Joachim Helbig hit on an oil tank farm. Next afternoon the Ju 88s of I./LG 1 staged forwards to Rhodes with the intention of mounting a second night attack on Haifa. But this plan was abandoned when it was caught by a dusk RAF bombing raid on Gadurra. It thus fell to II. *Gruppe* to make the eight-hour round trip from Eleusis to Haifa alone. The 16 Ju 88s started a number of fires and one crew also reported a hit on the 5450-ton light cruiser *Phoebe* that was lying in the harbour. With I. *Gruppe* still licking its wounds on Rhodes, II./LG 1 returned to Haifa on 10/11 June for the third night in a row, bombing the harbour and mining its entrance.

Then, on the morning of 13 June, aerial reconnaissance sighted a group of Royal Navy ships – reported to be a cruiser and six destroyers – off the Palestinian coast. I. and II./LG 1 (the former having returned to Eleusis the day before) were despatched to attack the warships. They were the vessels of the 15th Cruiser Squadron, which were patrolling close inshore as part of the naval force supporting the brief campaign currently being fought against the Vichy French in Syria. And the ships enjoyed aerial protection, courtesy of Tomahawks of the now Palestinian-based No 3 Sqn RAAF.

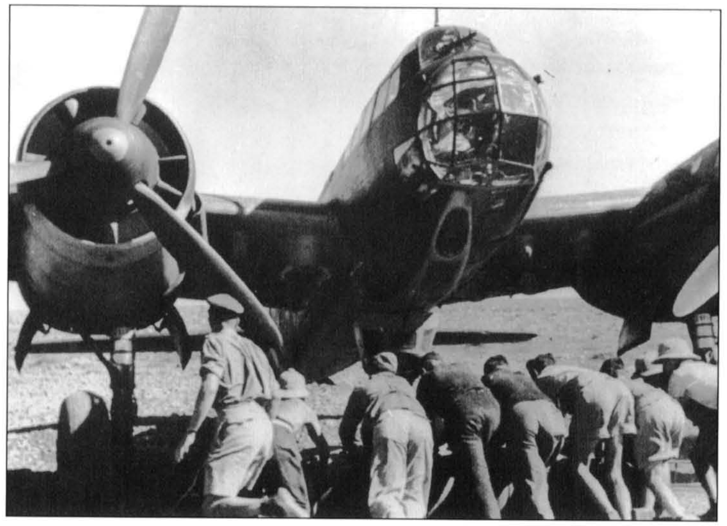
Unfortunately for the LG 1 crews, eight fighters arrived on the scene just as they commenced their dive on the warships. The Australians correctly identified the attackers as Ju 88s, but described them as 'wearing Italian markings' – perhaps the confusion arose from the Junkers' white aft fuselage bands? Be that as it may, the sudden appearance of the Tomahawks put the bombers off their aim. No ships were hit and two Ju 88s of II. *Gruppe* ('L1+DM' and 'L1+CN') were lost.

Straw-hatted groundcrew of II./LG 1 ride a bomb-train of 500-kg *Luftmine A* parachute mines out to the waiting aircraft at Heraklion

The two *Gruppen* had more success when they returned to the Syrian coast to attack the warships once again 48 hours later. Hits were claimed on four vessels, including the 1370-ton destroyers *Ilex* and *Isis*, both of which were badly damaged. The following day's OKW communiqué announced that a light cruiser had been sunk after suffering four direct hits and that a heavy cruiser had been badly damaged! This time the Royal Navy's aerial umbrella was being provided by Hurricanes of No 80 Sqn. Two aircraft of 5./LG 1 were forced to make emergency landings, with 'L1+EN' putting down to the north in neutral Turkey, where *Staffelkapitän* Oberleutnant Wilger Schacht and his crew were promptly interned.

While I. and II./LG 1 were employed in these strategic operations in the eastern Mediterranean, III. *Gruppe* had been engaged in the Luftwaffe's more customary tactical role flying in support of Rommel's troops in the Western Desert. During the past week their targets had included enemy positions at Sidi Barrani, Mersa, Fuka and, of course, Tobruk. But then on 14 June – the day Hauptmann Kuno Hoffmann, *Kommandeur* of I./LG 1, was awarded the Knight's Cross for his *Gruppe's* performance in the recent Balkan and Cretan campaigns – the British launched Operation *Battleaxe*, a limited counter-offensive aimed at the relief of Tobruk.

Although down to less than a dozen serviceable machines, III./LG 1 flew a constant round of missions during the daylight hours of 15 June against ground targets in the Sollum-Fort Capuzzo areas of the Egyptian-Libyan border, where Rommel's troops were offering fierce resistance. Three days later, on 18 June, I. and II./LG 1 were ordered down from Eleusis to add their weight to the aerial assault on the attacking British armour. But by then *Battleaxe* was already in serious trouble. There were reports of more than 150 British tanks having been knocked out, and the British themselves went so far as to admit that 'the land battle has swung very much in the enemy's favour'.



No such luxuries as bomb trolleys in the desert, apparently – but who needs them when eight men are all it takes to roll a 1000-kg bomb into position beneath this Ju 88A-6 of III./LG 1, perhaps in preparation for yet another raid on Tobruk. The original print of this photograph is dated 13 June 1941, just one day prior to Operation *Battleaxe*

Within hours *Battleaxe* had been abandoned altogether. British and Commonwealth troops pulled back, and a period almost of stalemate settled over the Western Desert, at least on the ground, as both sides sought to build up their strength for the next major confrontation.

For the Eleusis-based I. and I./LG 1 it was quickly back to business as usual in the eastern Mediterranean. Their Ju 88s raided Alexandria during the night of 20/21 June and again 48 hours later. The two *Gruppen* visited Alexandria at least three more times. and Haifa once, before the month was out, all without loss.

In the meantime, crews from III. *Gruppe*, finding few targets of opportunity in their sweeps of Egypt's western frontier regions, more often than not rounded off their missions by unloading their bombs on long-suffering Tobruk during the flight back to base at Derna. They also regularly attacked the small coastal convoys that ran the gauntlet from Egypt to ferry supplies to the Tobruk garrison. One such operation on 29 June resulted in the loss of the 1100-ton destroyer *Waterhen* off Sollum. A near miss holed the vessel's engine-room, and although it was taken in tow, the warship sank.

The 758-ton tanker *Pass of Balmaha* was also claimed sunk on the 29th, but this is far from certain. Escorted by two sloops, the *Pass of Balmaha* had set out for Tobruk a week earlier. Surviving a heavy attack by Stukas on 24 June, it completed what was later described as 'probably the most important individual run ever made to Tobruk'. The 750 tons of fuel that she delivered averted a looming petrol crisis, and gave the garrison enough supplies for the next 70 days. This was particularly timely, as a bomb dropped during III./LG 1's raid on Tobruk on the afternoon of 9 July would put the town's bulk petrol pumping plant out of action for an entire month. It is perhaps possible that the *Pass of Balmaha* was then attacked and believed sunk during its return voyage, but any such belief was mistaken, for other reference sources – both English and German – list the ship as one of the two vessels torpedoed by the U-97 off Egypt on 17 October 1941.

The main burden of general supply during the Tobruk siege, however, fell upon the so-called 'destroyer-ferries', which transported men and materials into the garrison under cover of darkness. The crews of III./LG 1 found it difficult to deal with these. Thirty-four such 'Spud Runs', as they were known in the Royal Navy, would be made by the destroyers of the Tenth Flotilla during July – a figure that rose to 58 in August.

In the eastern Mediterranean, I. and II./LG 1 began July with a one-off attack on Famagusta harbour, in Cyprus, on the 4th. The following day at Eleusis, Hauptmann Gerhard Kollewe, the *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./LG 1, was presented with the Knight's Cross by *Geschwaderkommodore* Oberstleutnant Friedrich-Karl Knust. And just over 24 hours later still, the two *Gruppen* were back over familiar territory with a night raid on the Royal Navy's main base at Alexandria. Here they claimed the sinking of a small Greek freighter and damage to the carrier *Formidable*. The latter, incidentally, was undergoing repairs after being attacked by aircraft of III./KG 30 west of Crete on 29 June. This was one of the *Gruppe's* last major successes of its first tour in the Mediterranean.

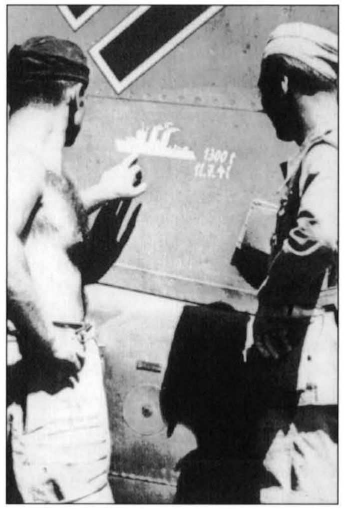
By the beginning of July III./KG 30 had been reduced to just a single *Staffel* of seven serviceable machines, the other two *Staffeln* having already been withdrawn for re-equipment. By mid-month the *Gruppe* had retired from the theatre altogether and returned to the control of *Luftflotte* 3 in northwest Europe.

The departure of III./KG 30 meant that for the next four months or more *Lehrgeschwader* 1 would provide the sole Ju 88 bomber presence in the Mediterranean. And for much of that time the *Gruppen's* strict division of labour would remain as hitherto, with I. and II./LG 1 attacking strategic targets around the eastern Mediterranean rim and III./LG 1 supporting Rommel's forces in the desert.

During July, for example, the former bombed and mined Alexandria, the Suez Canal and the great Bitter Lake, carried out raids on Port Said, Ismailia and Haifa, and attacked the airfield at Abu Sueir, where it was claimed – somewhat optimistically, perhaps – that over 100 aircraft were destroyed on the ground, three hangars were left blazing fiercely and the whole field was 'just one huge sea of flames'. But its greatest confirmed success of the month was achieved during the raid on shipping in Suez Bay on the night of 13/14 July when two bombs hit the 27,759-ton liner *Georgic*, now serving as a troop transport. Fire raged through the giant vessel, which was at first given up as a total loss.

Yet another 'AS'-coded machine, this one being '4D+AS' of 8./KG 30, pictured on a bright but breezy summer's day sometime around the end of June 1941 – shortly before the *Staffel* was withdrawn from the Mediterranean

This silhouette, clearly depicting a small twin-funnelled warship, together with the tonnage (1300) and date (11.7.41) recorded alongside, all point to the same thing – this must be the aircraft responsible for sinking the Royal Navy destroyer *Defender* off Sidi Barrani



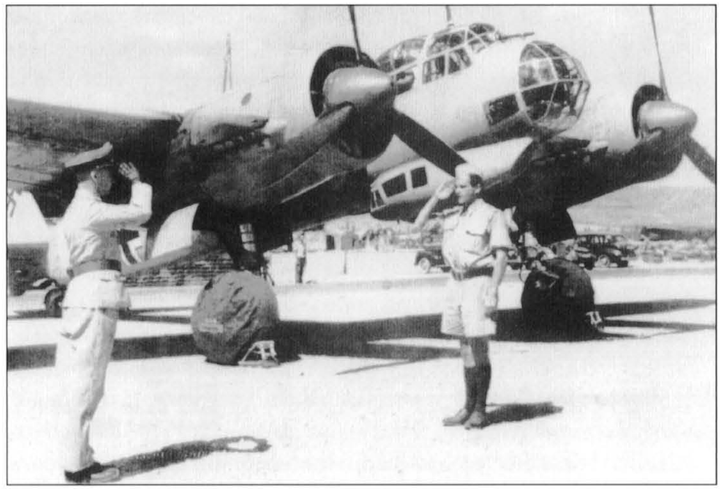
III./LG 1 also had an anti-shipping success to report, albeit on a less gargantuan scale. Having already damaged the 1375-ton destroyer *Defender* north of Sollum in the early hours of 9 July, the *Gruppe* located the vessel again 48 hours later. Hit by another four bombs, the *Defender* was taken in tow by the destroyer *Vendetta*, but foundered off Sidi Barrani. But, as usual, it was Tobruk that received most of III./LG 1's attention in July, although other targets attacked during the month included a troop encampment near Mersa Matruh and the airfield at Fuka.

Given the intensity and frequency of the operations flown, it is incredible that the entire *Geschwader* suffered just one combat fatality throughout the whole of July. This was a 6. *Staffel* air gunner killed by anti-aircraft fire during the attack on British shipping off Haifa on the 8th. Three of the *Geschwader's* aircraft had been written off, however – one in an RAF bombing raid on Eleusis (also, coincidentally, on the 8th), another in a ditching and the third in an emergency landing.

In terms of operations flown, August was very much a continuation of July. But successes were becoming fewer and losses were starting to climb. The most serious material loss occurred on 17 August when three Ju 88s were destroyed at Eleusis, and another two severely damaged. The *Geschwader* reported these as being the result of yet another RAF raid, when in fact it appears that one of the aerial mines being loaded aboard the aircraft for that night's mission had been accidentally detonated.

The nearest the *Geschwader* came to a sinking in August was when III./LG 1 damaged the destroyer *Nizam* northwest of Mersa Matruh on the 21st. But two days later, when attacking a coastal convoy off Sidi Barrani, III. *Gruppe* lost an aircraft in a running fight with the ships' escorting Tomahawks. The month was to end on a happier note, however, when, on 30 August, Eleusis witnessed another Knight's Cross presentation by *Geschwaderkommodore* Oberstleutnant Knust. On this occasion the recipient was Oberfeldwebel Franz Schlund, a member of Hauptmann Joachim Helbig's crew. Having flown 200+ missions and successfully fought off 13 fighter attacks, Schlund was the first Luftwaffe wireless-operator/air gunner to be honoured with the Knight's Cross.

By mid-September 1941 it was becoming all too evident that Rommel was losing the Western Desert supply race – and losing it badly. It was clear that the earlier decision to transfer *X. Fliegerkorps* from Sicily to Greece and Crete had been not merely premature, but a major blunder.



Hauptmann Joachim Helbig, right, reports his 4. *Staffel* all present and correct to LG 1's *Geschwaderkommodore* Oberstleutnant Friedrich Karl Knust. The date is 30 August 1941, the place Eleusis airfield,Greece, and the occasion . . .

. . . the presentation of the Knight's Cross to Helbig's wireless-operator/air gunner, Oberfeldwebel Franz Schlund, seen here (centre) between Helbig and the *Geschwader's* standard bearer

Hauptmann Hermann Hogeback, the *Staffelkapitän* of 8./LG 1, was awarded the Knight's Cross in Africa on 8 September 1941. He is shown here (second from left) in early 1943 wearing the Oak Leaves as *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./KG 6 (the ex-III./LG 1). By war's end Oberstleutnant Hogeback had received the Swords and was *Geschwaderkommodore* of KG 6. But perhaps his greatest claim to fame is that by then his was the only bomber crew in the entire Luftwaffe with every member sporting the Knight's Cross!

An equally informal shot of Hauptmann 'Jochen' Helbig and his crew. They are, from left to right, Major Stefan (navigator/observer), Helbig (pilot), Oberfeldwebel Schlund (wireless-operator/air gunner) and Unteroffizier Czirpa (air gunner). Note the badge of II./LG 1 – the coat-of-arms of the city of Schwerin – on the machine in the background. Compare it with the stylised geese of III. *Gruppe* (the later III./KG 6) shown in the photo at bottom of page 52. Loss tables indicate that Wk-Nr. 4371 seen here was 'L1+KS', which was subsequently shot down by a Hurricane east of Derna on 27 December 1941 (see text on page 55)

The task of keeping Malta in check had been entrusted to the Italians, but this had proved too much for them alone. Malta's strength had been allowed to grow and now its air and sea forces were again wreaking havoc on the Axis supply convoys to North Africa. In an attempt to safeguard Rommel's vital seaborne supply line, *X. Fliegerkorps* was ordered to suspend its strategic operations in the eastern Mediterranean and divert all its energies instead to convoy escort and protection missions.

This, it was hoped, would help alleviate some of the immediate pressure being felt by Axis forces currently holding fast along the Libyan-Egyptian border region. But it did nothing to address the root cause of the problem – the resurgence of Malta. This would require more drastic action. And drastic action was about to be taken.

With his armies in Russia slowly grinding to halt and beginning to dig in for the winter in front of Moscow, Hitler decreed that the HQ of the air fleet responsible for the central sector, *Luftflotte* 2 – together with one of its component *Fliegerkorps* – should be withdrawn from the eastern front and transferred lock, stock and barrel to Sicily to resume the air offensive against Malta. But the combat units involved in this large-scale move would need time to re-equip and recuperate from the rigours of the Russian front. And time was something Rommel did not have.

On 18 November Gen Auchinleck, the British C-in-C Middle East, launched his now considerable armoured strength in a wide sweeping movement through the desert around the southern flank of the German-held Halfaya Pass position. At first Rommel was unsure whether this was merely a reconnaissance or a major offensive. He was not left in uncertainty for long. Operation *Crusader* was a very different proposition indeed from the earlier ill-prepared and poorly executed *Battleaxe*. And all doubt was dispelled when the advancing troops linked up with the defenders of Tobruk, bringing to an end the historic eight-month siege.

Rommel began to retreat across Cyrenaica, mounting a series of counter-attacks, but totally unable to halt Auchinleck's progress. Benghazi was retaken on Christmas Eve 1941 and Rommel fell back on El Agheila. By year's end practically the whole of Cyrenaica was in British hands (although Bardia and Halfaya continued to hold out until January 1942). But Rommel's armies had not been completely destroyed. True, he had suffered a serious reversal, and over 30,000 of his men had been captured, but, crucially, the *Afrika Korps* remained in being – and immediately began preparing for a renewed counter-offensive of its own.

So much for the situation on the ground in North Africa during the last six weeks of 1941. But what of LG 1's activities during that same period? Heavy sand and rain storms in the Benghazi region on 17 November (the eve of *Crusader*) had kept III./LG 1 on the ground for much of the day. And then, indicative of the confusion in the German camp at the start of Auchinleck's offensive, a greater part of the next 48 hours was spent by the *Geschwader* out over the Mediterranean flying convoy-escort and anti-shipping patrols. It was not until 20 November that III. *Gruppe* intervened in the ground campaign by attacking troop movements along the Egyptian border. All aircraft returned safely, but a surprise raid by RAF fighters that same day destroyed three of III./LG 1's Ju 88s and damaged five more, three of which were written off. Despite – or perhaps because of – these losses, the bulk of I. and II./LG 1 flew in to Benina from Eleusis the following day.

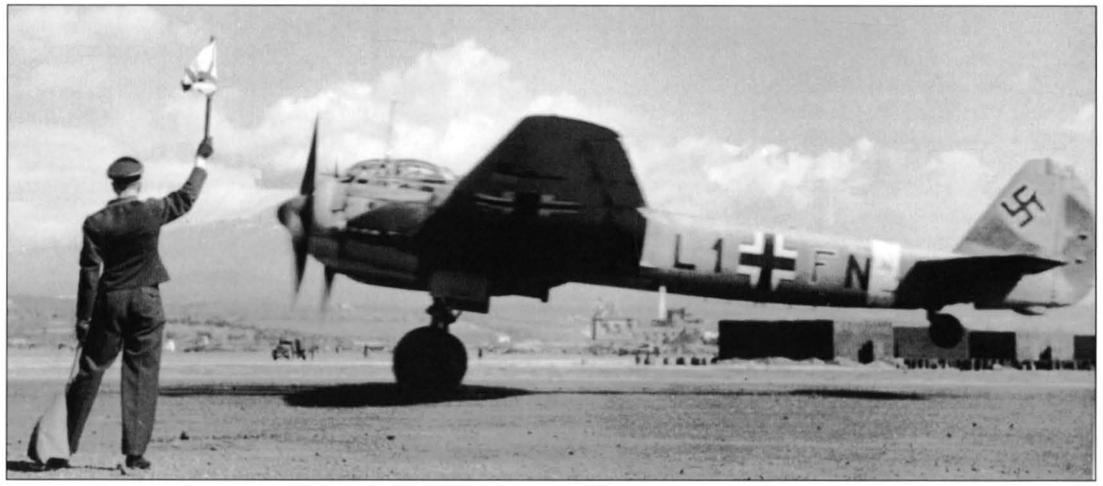
On 22 November all three *Gruppen* operated in support of Rommel's troops. Two bombers were lost, 1. *Staffel's* 'L1+JH' being downed by anti-aircraft fire while attacking tanks and an unidentified Ju 88 of 4./LG 1 force-landing in the desert after being set upon by Hurricanes. It was the start of a costly period for the *Geschwader*. By year-end it had lost more than a dozen Ju 88s, with almost as many again damaged.

After just five days at Benina most of I. and II./LG 1's aircraft returned to Eleusis. Henceforth, the two *Gruppen* would operate primarily from their home base in Greece, attacking British lines of communication and supply routes to the rear of Auchinleck's advancing troops. A frequent target was the Egyptian coastal railway, particularly its western terminus – the railhead and large stores depots at Sidi Barrani. On occasion they would also deploy briefly to one or other of the Cyrenaican airfields still in Luftwaffe hands to offer more direct support to the embattled *Afrika Korps*. Late in the afternoon of 29 November, for example, II./LG 1 flew in to Derna. The *Gruppe* would remain here for only a few hours before staging, via Benina, back to Eleusis. But it was long enough both for 4. *Staffel's* 'L1+CM' to be brought down by a nightfighter and for Hauptmann Joachim Helbig (who had been appointed *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe* on 5 November) to be slightly wounded in an RAF bombing raid on Benina.

Although based primarily in Greece, I./LG 1's Ju 88s flew numerous missions in support of the *Afrika Korps*. 2. *Staffel's* desert dappled 'L1+EK' (note 'last two' repeated on the rudder in white) is ideally garbed for such operations

It was at this time, too, that LG 1's establishment was increased to four *Gruppen*. Like nearly every other *Kampfgeschwader*, LG 1 had long had its own *Ergänzungsstaffeln*. These were the operational training squadrons that prepared newly qualified crews for frontline service with the unit. Back in September the first of LG 1's *Ergänzungsstaffeln* had been transferred from the homeland to Salonika, in Greece, where it was to gain operational experience by flying convoy escort missions in the Aegean.

On 23 November the three *Ergänzungsstaffeln* were amalgamated and redesignated officially to become IV./LG 1. Still based at Salonika, their primary task now was to conduct anti-submarine patrols in the Aegean area. This led to the possibly unique situation of there being two entirely separate *Gruppen* currently on the Luftwaffe's order of battle, each bearing the same designation. For in the far northern sector of the Russian front the original dive-bomber *Gruppe* of the pre-war *Lehrgeschwader* was still operating as IV.(St)/LG 1. Presumably it was felt that there was little fear of confusion given the geographical separation of the two units, one flying Ju 87s in the Arctic and the other flying Ju 88s in the Aegean. In the event, the matter was resolved two months later when the former was finally redesignated I./StG 5.



Having been given the green and white flag, 5./LG 1's 'L1+FN' roars down the runway – at Eleusis? – and is just about to lift off

By 11 December I. and II./LG 1 were back in North Africa, at Derna and Tmimi respectively. Together with III. *Gruppe*, which was still operating out of Derna, raids were flown against Tobruk and attacks carried out on motorised columns near the desert fortress of Bir Hacheim. 1./LG 1 lost its second *Staffelkapitän* in just over four months when Oberleutnant Heinrich Paulus' 'L1+HH' was forced to land in the desert after being set upon by a mixed formation of Tomahawks and Hurricanes. Paulus and his crew were all taken into captivity.

By this stage Rommel was falling back on the Gazala Line to the west of Tobruk. The Luftwaffe's airfields in Cyrenaica were coming under increasing air attack, and as the fighting front approached they were abandoned one after the other, any unserviceable machines being blown up to prevent their falling into enemy hands. During the afternoon of 11 December all three *Gruppen* of LG 1 began withdrawing to Eleusis.

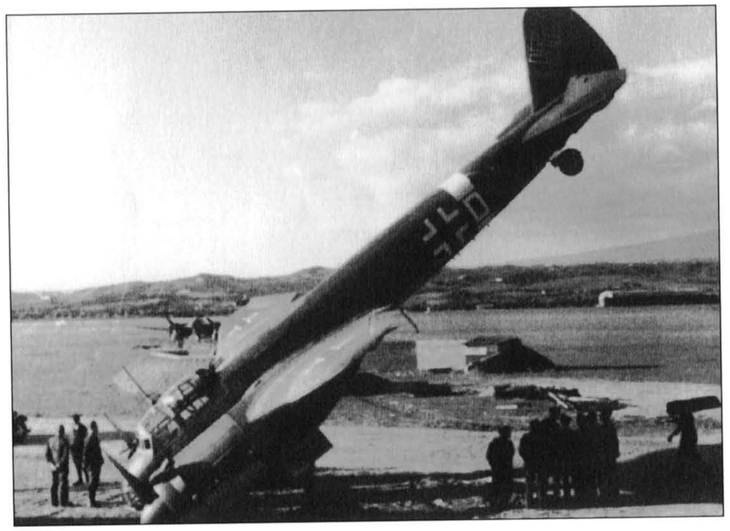
In the week that followed there was a brief resurgence in anti-shipping activity, with inconclusive attacks on Royal Navy warships on both the 14th and 17th. The latter date also witnessed the new IV. *Gruppe's* first operational loss when 'L1+KW' failed to return from an armed reconnaissance sweep of the sea to the west of Crete.

But still the *Geschwader* continued to offer what help it could to the hard-pressed *Afrika Korps*, sending one or more *Gruppen* across the Mediterranean to attack targets in the Western Desert every day until year's end. At least three Ju 88s fell victim to RAF fighters during this time, the last – 8. *Staffel's* 'L1+KS' – being claimed by the CO of the Hurricane-equipped No 229 Sqn between Gazala and Derna on 27 December. Three days later, the surviving desert veterans of III. *Gruppe* departed Eleusis for Salonika, where they passed their aircraft over to IV./LG 1 before entraining for Germany to rest and re-equip. Redesignated to become III./KG 6 in 1942, the *Gruppe* would return briefly to the Mediterranean in this new guise during the latter half of 1943.

By now the HQ of *Luftflotte* 2 had arrived in Sicily from Russia. The combat units of *II. Fliegerkorps* also began to assemble on the island in preparation for the renewal of the assault on Malta. The *Korps'* main striking power was concentrated in its five *Kampfgruppen*, all flying Ju 88s – I./KG 54 based at Gerbini, II. and III./KG 77 at Comiso and *Kampfgruppen* 606 and 806 at Catania, these last two being semi-autonomous bomber units created out of the *Küstenfliegergruppen* (coastal reconnaissance wings) of the early war years. Including *X. Fliegerkorps'* three Ju 88 *Gruppen* in Greece (I., II. and IV./LG 1), there were thus eight *Kampfgruppen* equipped with Ju 88s in the Mediterranean theatre at the beginning of 1942 (although none currently based in North Africa).

BACK TO MALTA

The opening of the second round of the air bombardment of Malta was another very low-key affair. It was almost as if the Luftwaffe had taken a leaf from their enemy's book. *II. Fliegerkorps'* operations, consisting of small formations of bombers – often as few as three or four per mission – strongly escorted by fighters, were very reminiscent of the 'Circus' tactics



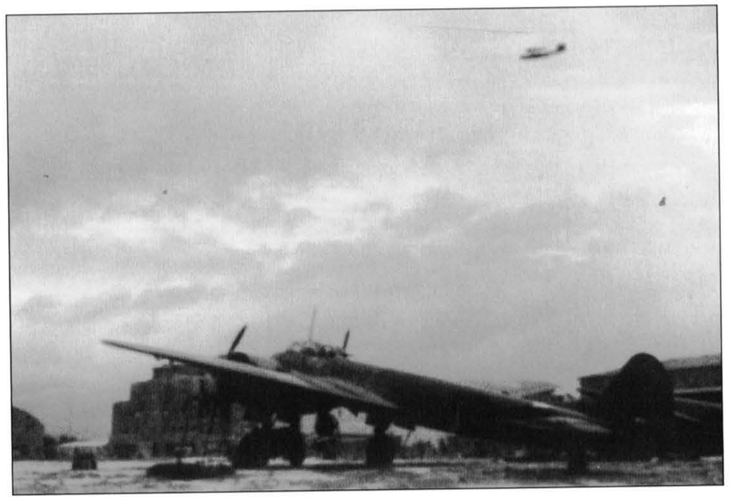
Some found Sicily a little harder to get used to. 'M7+DH' of 1./KGr 806 has nosed over in the soft soil, the result of a taxiing accident at Catania on 4 January 1942

employed by the RAF when it began its 'lean into France' in the summer of 1941. Raids at this level, amounting to little more than harassing attacks, would continue to be flown against Malta until early March. There were, however, two fundamental differences from the earlier RAF operations over northwest Europe – a succession of such missions would be sent against Malta nearly every day, up to a maximum of some 40-50 individual bomber sorties, and the Luftwaffe also attacked the island by night.

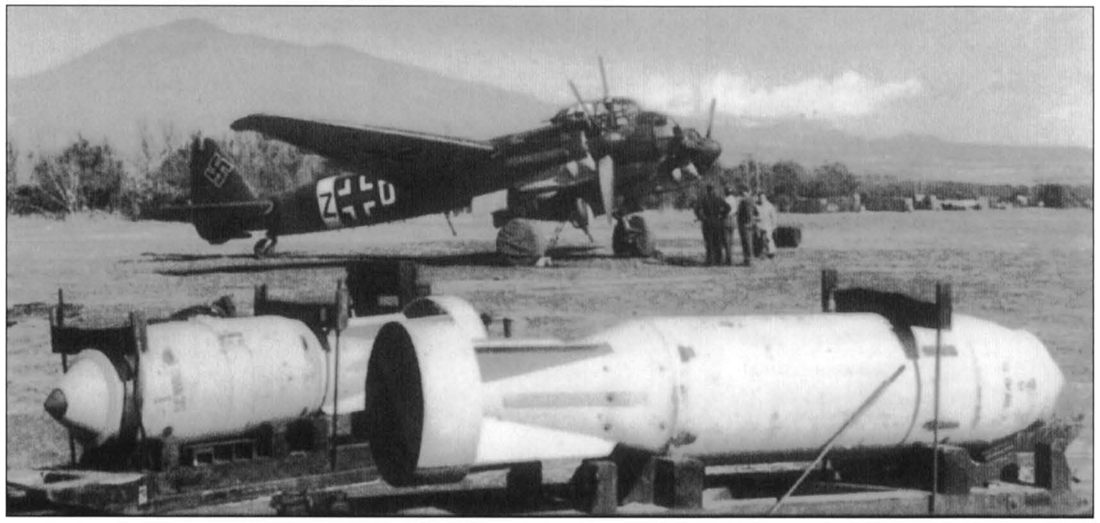
Whether these raids achieved their desired effect is a moot point. They certainly took a small but steady toll of the Ju 88s ordered to fly them, both in terms of combat casualties and losses from other causes. Some of the earliest casualties were recorded even before 1941 was out – II./KG 77 and KGr.806 each lost a machine on 24 December. And by the end of January 1942 every one of the five Ju 88 *Gruppen* based on Sicily had suffered similarly.

The attrition continued throughout the following month. Among the crews lost was that of Oberleutnant Herbert Loerz, the *Staffelkapitän* of 7./KG 77, whose '3Z+DD' was shot into the sea north of Malta's Grand Harbour on 12 February. Ten days later *II. Fliegerkorps* was reinforced by the arrival at Catania of I./LG 1. This was to be the first of a number of deployments to Sicily by elements of LG 1 from their bases in Greece and Crete, presumably to add their Mediterranean expertise to specific missions or operations. On this initial occasion I. *Gruppe* carried out three raids on Malta before returning to Heraklion, on Crete, on 24 February.

The tempo of the attacks on Malta, its docks, and airfields gradually began to increase during the first half of March. This was reflected in the growing casualty returns of the Ju 88 *Gruppen*. Included among them was another of KG 77's luckless *Staffelkapitäne* – '3Z+LP', the machine piloted by Oberleutnant Gerhard Becker of 6./KG 77, was brought down by gunfire over Hal Far on 9 March. The previous afternoon I./LG 1 had flown back in to Catania for another three-day stint of Malta operations. The *Gruppe's* machines participated in a 40+ raid on Luqa and Hal Far airfields on 10 March when, for the first time, the Luftwaffe encountered RAF Spitfires in the skies above Malta.



As the evening clouds gather over Comiso, an unidentified machine of KG 77, all fuselage and tail markings blacked out, prepares for the coming night's raid on Malta. Note the Do 24 air-sea rescue flying-boat of the Taormina-based *Seenotstaffel* 6 overhead



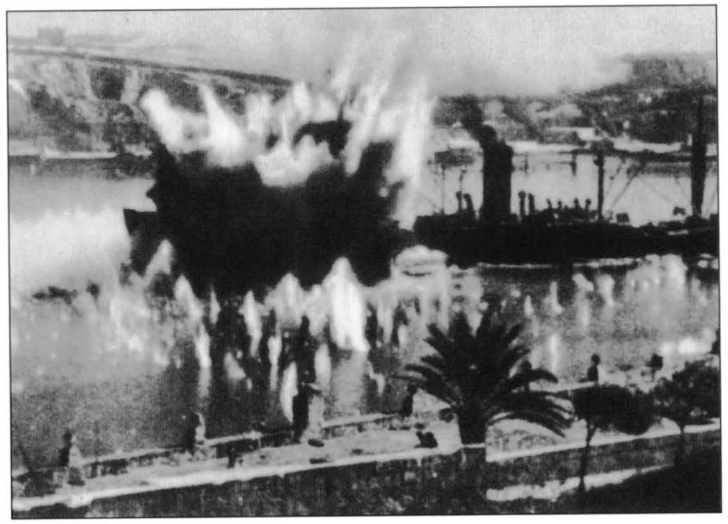
Once arrived at Comiso, on Sicily, the crews of KG 77 quickly got down to business if those bombs in the foreground are anything to go by. The one on the left is a 2200-lb SC 1000 'Hermann', whilst that on the right a 3960-lb SC 1800 'Satan'. Both appear to be painted the standard light sky blue, and each has the yellow stripe between the tail fins denoting its SC category – i.e. *Sprengbombe-Cylindrisch* (thin-cased GP bomb)

On 16 March it was the turn of II./LG 1 to transfer from Crete to Catania, where it would remain until the end of April. On the day of their arrival, Hauptmann Kollewe's crews were responsible for nine of the fifteen minor incursions logged by Malta's defenders between 0733 hrs and 1842 hrs on that date (the remaining six attacks being carried out by machines of KG 77). Twenty-four hours later, II./LG 1 was joined at Catania by I./LG 1, but again the latter's stay lasted just three days before it returned once more to Crete. Then, on 20 March, the Luftwaffe's assault on Malta underwent a dramatic change.

The day began in the usual manner, with penny-packets of Ju 88s (from II./LG 1 and II./KG 77) attacking various targets across the island. The only note out of the ordinary was provided by a pair of LG 1 machines that attacked the Royal Navy's submarine base at Manoel Island with rocket-assisted PC 1800 RS armour-piercing bombs – albeit to little effect. That evening, however, a massed raid of some 70 bombers drawn from all six Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* currently based on Sicily was directed against Takali airfield. It was repeated the following day, when two of the attackers were shot down by the field's AA gunners – '7T+FH' of KGr.606 crashed in the middle of the runway and 5./KG 77's '3Z+FN' spun to earth minus a wing close to the perimeter.

This marked the start of a sustained blitz on Malta that would be kept up throughout almost all of April 'on the heaviest scale yet brought to bear by the Luftwaffe against any single objective for so long a period'. After the island had been sufficiently weakened by blockade and air bombardment, the German intention was to capture Malta by airborne invasion, just as Crete had been taken the previous year. This intention was never carried out. But so intense were the raids endured by the population of Malta during this spring of 1942 that HM King George VI was later moved to award the George Cross to the whole island in recognition of the gallantry under fire displayed by its inhabitants.

While it fell to the island's Hurricanes and Spitfires to counter the air raids, it was the job of the Royal Navy and Merchant Marine to beat the blockade. On 20 March a convoy of four ships – three large merchantmen and the naval supply vessel *Breconshire*, carrying between them nearly 30,000 tons of urgently-needed supplies – had sailed from Alexandria



The Norwegian *Talabot* under attack in Malta's Grand Harbour on 26 March

with a strong escort of warships. After beating off a succession of Axis air and sea attacks in the eastern Mediterranean, the convoy came within effective range of *II. Fliegerkorps'* units based on Sicily. The Ju 88s were the first to engage, among them the machines of II./LG 1 and *Stab* KG 77. The latter's attack, carried out late in the afternoon of 22 March, cost it dearly when '3Z+AA', piloted by Major Arved Crüger, ex-*Gruppenkommandeur* of III./KG 30 and KG 77's new *Geschwaderkommodore* of just nine days' standing, was shot into the sea by the ships' gunners.

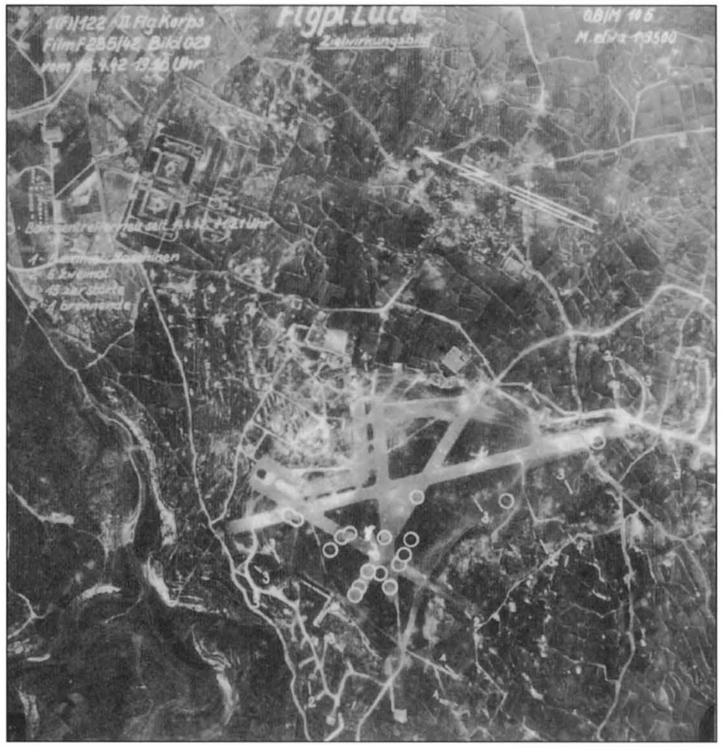
The following morning the slowest of the three merchantmen, the 7255-ton *Clan Campbell*, was sunk by Ju 88s (probably of II./LG 1) when 20 miles short of Malta. Not long afterwards the *Breconshire*, even closer to the island, was disabled by bomb-carrying Bf 109s of 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 53. After arriving in Grand Harbour, the two surviving freighters became a prime target for the Luftwaffe, whose crews were ordered to destroy them at their berths to prevent the unloading of their cargoes.

More attacks were carried out over the next three days, resulting in the loss of six Ju 88s to the island's defences, before a series of devastating raids on 26 March achieved the desired results. The 6758-ton Norwegian *Talabot* was hit several times, causing fires to break out in its ammunition holds. The vessel was scuttled to prevent the blaze from spreading. Three hours later, Oberleutnant Erwin Sy, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./LG 1, claimed a direct hit on a '6000-ton freighter'. This was in all likelihood the 5415-ton *Pampas*, which also went down when a bomb penetrated its funnel and flooded the engine room. At the time of the attacks less than ten percent of the vessels' vital supplies had been unloaded.

Malta's airfields were also suffering. The original caption to this picture claims that these are bombs bursting on Luqa . . .

Several other ships were sunk in these raids on Valetta's Grand Harbour, including the destroyer *Legion* and the submarine P 39. Meanwhile, the battered *Breconshire* – veteran of eight earlier Malta supply runs – had been towed into Marsaxlokk Bay on the island's southern coast, where, after being subjected to further attack, she finally capsized on 27 March.

II. Fliegerkorps' Gruppen continued their raids on Malta throughout April and into May. During this period numerous warships were sunk or severely damaged in raids on Grand Harbour, including the submarines P 36 and *Pandora*, both of which were sent to the bottom on 1 April. Three weeks later the remaining boats of the Royal Navy's 10th Submarine Flotilla were ordered to leave Malta for Alexandria.

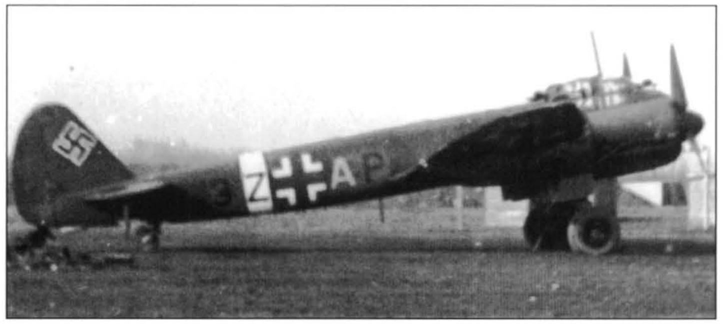


. . . and this is a reconnaissance photo of the same target taken by a Ju 88 of 1.(F)/122 on the evening of 18 April 1942. The small white rings indicate fresh bomb craters that have appeared since the morning raid of 14 April. Photographic intelligence has also pinpointed and annotated five single-engined machines visible on the ground, plus five twin-engined aircraft, 15 wrecks and one still burning

With the island's underwater teeth effectively drawn, the Ju 88s were now free to concentrate on the island's airfields in an attempt to neutralise the enemy's aerial striking power. Savage bombing attacks were mounted against Luqa, Takali and Hal Far almost daily. And these in turn led to lengthening casualty lists for each of the six *Kampfgruppen* involved, as crews were either brought down in combat over or near the island, or crash-landed damaged machines upon return to their Sicilian bases.

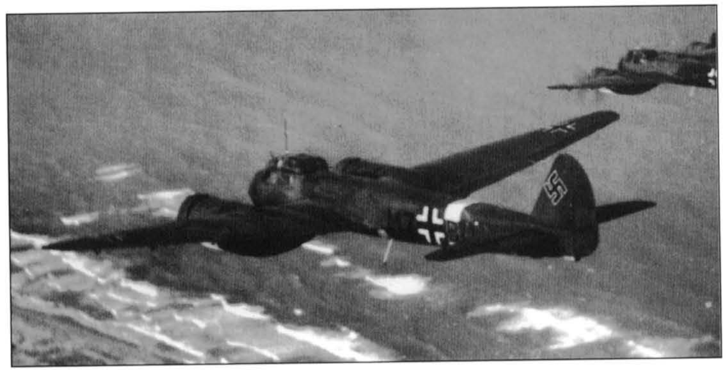
One of April's earliest losses was Oberleutnant Otto Bischoff, the *Staffelkapitän* of 4./KG 77, whose '3Z+LM' was downed by a Beaufighter on the night of 1 April. Having already distinguished himself during the night blitz on Britain and in Russia, Bischoff was awarded a posthumous Knight's Cross on 3 May. 3./KG 54's *Staffelkapitän*, Hauptmann Wilhelm Schmidt, was more fortunate when he was forced to ditch after being hit by anti-aircraft fire on 26 April. Although wounded, he was found and picked up by the German air-sea rescue service.

Forty-eight hours after Hauptmann Schmidt's 'B3+NL' sank beneath the waves east of Valetta, *II. Fliegerkorps* ordered a maximum effort to be mounted against 'all of Malta's remaining important military targets not yet destroyed'. Three separate raids – each comprising some 50-60+ bombers and dive-bombers, strongly escorted by fighters – were flown on 28 April. It was the last major attack the island was to suffer. The 'Ultra' intercepts that had first warned of the Ju 88s' arrival in the Mediterranean theatre nearly 18 months earlier, were now indicating that II. and III./KG 77 were preparing to leave Sicily for France. And with II./LG 1 about to return to Greece, to be followed by elements of I./KG 54 in mid-May, this left only two full *Gruppen* of Ju 88s – *Kampfgruppen* 606 and 806 – to maintain the pressure on Malta. This was to prove a difficult and expensive task.



6./KG 77's '3Z+AP' at rest between night raids over Malta. The machine's undersides have been painted black and the forward firing MG 81 machine-gun in the windscreen appears to have been fitted with a glare shield

It has been suggested that the turning point in the island's fortunes came on 10 May. On this date the island's defending fighters alone claimed 40 aircraft destroyed or damaged. Eleven of these claims were for Ju 88s, although in reality only four failed to return from the day's raids – two machines each from KGr 806 and I./KG 54. The former unit would continue to suffer regular attrition in the weeks ahead. Among the casualties were two of the *Gruppe's* three *Staffelkapitäne*, both of whom fell to Spitfires. 1./KGr 806's Hauptmann Emil Braun was downed in an attack on Malta's airfields on 14 May, and Oberleutnant Kurt Kehrer of 2./KGr 806 was piloting one of the two aircraft shot into the sea in flames while attacking a convoy on 15 June.


Aircraft of KGr 806 ('M7+BA' in the foreground) returning from another mission over Malta . . .

MALTA RELIEF

Two reasons have been given for the easing of the heavy air raids on Malta. One is that many of the aircraft sent to the Mediterranean were needed back in Russia in readiness for the 1942 summer campaign on the eastern front. The other was that the renewed offensive by Rommel was making such tremendous gains in its advance on Egypt that the ultimate fall of Cairo, and subsequent Axis conquest of the Nile Delta, were now regarded very much as forgone conclusions. This in turn meant that an airborne invasion of Malta was no longer a necessity. For the second year in a row the bombing of Malta had been prematurely called off – or at least allowed to wither on the vine. The Axis powers would not be given the chance to make the same mistake a third time.

Rommel's resilience had indeed been remarkable. Launched back on 18 November 1941, Operation *Crusader* had carried British forces right across Cyrenaica to Benghazi and beyond. They had recaptured all the territory that they had taken from the Italians the year before, but had then lost to Rommel's first desert offensive. Now exactly the same thing was about to happen again. The moment Rommel sensed that his opponents were running out of momentum he immediately began preparations for a counterattack. The supply situation at Tripoli to his immediate rear had improved considerably. Now it was the British who were having to operate at the end of a long and vulnerable supply line.

The eastern Mediterranean *Gruppen* of LG 1 had been harassing the enemy's lengthening lines of communications throughout the recent German retreat, hitting not only at road and rail transport, but also the ports of Bardia and Tobruk, as well as the coastal supply convoys. It was towards the end of this period, on 16 January 1942, that Hauptmann Joachim Helbig, the *Kommandeur* of I./LG 1 was awarded the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross.

Two days later Rommel went onto the offensive, pushing forward from El Agheila to retake Agedabia on 23 January. The Ju 88s of LG 1 would continue to lend strategic support to the now advancing *Afrika Korps* by attacking land and sea targets to the enemy's rear. On 19 January a I. *Gruppe* machine had scored a direct hit on the 6655-ton Norwegian freighter *Thermopylae*. This vessel had been part of a four-ship convoy making for Malta, but after developing an engine defect it had been detached and re-routed instead to Benghazi under strong naval escort. Badly damaged by the Ju 88's bombs and blazing fiercely, the ship – laden with munitions – had to be sunk.

. . . and one of the photographs they brought back. Although understandably somewhat out of focus – pilot Leutnant Kissling is only just beginning to climb away after the dive – the bomb bursts are clearly visible. Whether by accident or design, the aircraft's ordnance has struck the Custom House area of the Grand Harbour waterfront, almost exactly above the island's underground operations rooms and offices

The following evening 12 aircraft of I./LG 1 left Eleusis on a highly secret mission. Proving that the wireless intercept war was not all one-sided, Luftwaffe signals intelligence had learned that the HQ of the enemy's Desert Air Force was housed in a large villa on the outskirts of Barce. The mission was flown under strict radio silence. The exact results of the raid are not known, but at least one crew claimed hits on the building, for which each member received the Iron Cross, First Class!

On 29 January Rommel's troops retook Benghazi. The British had just got the port up and running again, but now they were forced to evacuate 'this very valuable advanced base' in a hurry, having been able to land only 6000 tons of supplies (nearly half of it petrol) during their brief five weeks' occupation. But Rommel did not stop there. By the end of the first week in February the *Afrika Korps* had advanced as far as the Gazala Line, less than 40 miles from Tobruk. This was a line of deep minefields, interspersed by defensive 'boxes' hastily set up by the retreating British. It stretched from El Gazala, on the coast road, some 35 miles down into the desert, where its southern end was anchored on the 'fortress' outpost of Bir Hacheim. And it was here that Rommel paused to gather strength.

Operation *Crusader* was now well and truly over. And for the next three months, in the words of one noted historian, there was 'a lull in desert air operations', while the eastern Mediterranean witnessed 'a certain amount of desultory harassing activity by Luftwaffe bomber forces based in Greece and Crete, directed mainly against the harbours of Port Said and Alexandria, and British supply depots and lines of communications in Egypt'.

An anonymous Ju 88A-4 (last two code letters are 'EN') already bombed up and now being refuelled 'somewhere in North Africa'. The prancing black horse badge on the door of the Opel Blitz fuel bowser ought to provide a clue as to the where and when, but so far this has defied positive identification

To the crews of LG 1 actually flying the eight-hour missions across the eastern Mediterranean, their operations did not seem 'desultory' in the least. With the ground fighting stalled along the Gazala Line to the west of Tobruk, LG 1's three *Gruppen* – rarely mustering on average more than 40 serviceable machines between them – were hard pressed to carry out the many tasks they were being asked to perform. Nor, contrary to the somewhat dismissive quote above, were their objectives confined to Egypt. They also attacked targets close to the frontlines in Libya and continued to mount their anti-shipping sorties.

In the early hours of 12 February, for example, every available machine of I./LG 1 took off from Eleusis to attack Tobruk harbour. And it was on this same date that a three-ship convoy, protected by four Royal Navy cruisers and 16 destroyers, left Alexandria for Malta. Late the following day nine of the *Geschwader's* Ju 88s attacked the merchantmen, damaging one so badly that it had to be towed into Tobruk by two of the escorting destroyers. This was the 7255-ton *Clan Campbell*, which would be sunk during its next attempt to reach Malta, as already described above.

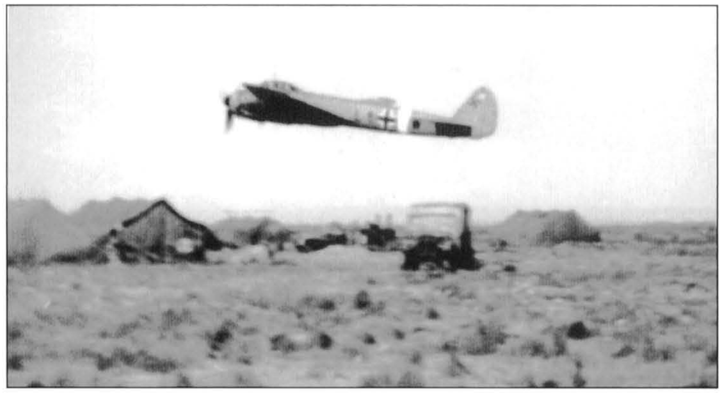
On the afternoon of 14 February five aircraft of I. *Gruppe* caught, dive-bombed and sank the *Clan Campbell's* 7262-ton sister-ship, the *Clan Chattan*. Finally, that same evening, 14 machines of II./LG 1 were despatched from Eleusis to attack the one remaining freighter. Already damaged and under tow, the 7798-ton *Rowallan Castle* suffered two further hits and had to be sunk shortly afterwards. Not a single merchantman of convoy MW 9 reached Malta.

Meanwhile, there was once again a Ju 88 presence in North Africa, albeit initially only a token one. During the last week of January 1942, Oberleutnant Rudolf Meier's 12./LG 1 had been detached from IV. *Gruppe* in Greece to provide direct support for the *Afrika Korps*. Operating at first from desert landing grounds astride Cyrenaica's border with Tripolitania, Meier's *Staffel* moved up to Benina after the recapture of Benghazi. 12/LG 1 would lose at least two of its aircraft to enemy fighters in the Tobruk area in the weeks ahead.

During the same period, from mid-February to mid-March, Hauptmann Joachim Helbig's I. *Gruppe* could perhaps be forgiven for feeling giddy, being transferred no fewer than seven times between Eleusis, Heraklion and Catania. This nomadic existence only came to an end when it was decided on 16 March to deploy II./LG 1 to Catania on a more permanent basis – or at least for the duration of the aerial bombardment of Malta. Before taking up residence on Catania, however, Hauptmann Kollewe's pilots had notched up another minor success by sinking two small British coastal vessels, the 2825-ton *Bintang* and the 1360-ton *Hanne* (the former claimed by the *Gruppe* to be an 8000 tonner!), off Bardia on 22 February. The attackers did not get away scot-free. They ran into a formation of Hurricanes on convoy patrol, which shot 6. *Staffel's* 'L1+LP' into the sea.

On 28 April 1942 an aircraft coded 'L1+AA' was shot down over Alexandria. It is not known whether this was the actual machine in question (the Wk-Nr. is indecipherable on the original print), but what *is* on record is that the aircraft lost was not being flown by LG 1's *Geschwaderkommodore*, to whom it was officially assigned, but by an NCO crew of 2. *Staffel*. What was that again about the only hard-and-fast rule?

During the latter half of March and throughout April the Ju 88s of both I. *Gruppe* and 12. *Staffel* continued to strike at ground targets in North Africa. The latter – based at Benina and Berca, but also making use of Derna as a forward landing ground – operated primarily over Libyan territory immediately behind the Gazala Line. Objectives such as Tobruk and the complex of fighter airfields around Gambut were attacked on a regular basis. Meanwhile, 'Jochen' Helbig's I. *Gruppe*, now based at Heraklion alongside the *Geschwaderstab* under new *Kommodore* Oberstleutnant Franz von Benda, concentrated mainly on targets in Egypt further to the enemy's rear. These included lines of communication, supply depots and airfields such as the RAF's bomber base at Qotafiya.



On the day following the loss of 'AA' in the eastern Mediterranean, 12./LG 1's 'L1+LW' was caught on camera as it beat up Benina airfield outside Benghazi after returning from another successful raid on Tobruk

Neither unit suffered any combat casualties over the desert during these weeks, but I./LG 1 did lose two aircraft in raids on Alexandria. 2. *Staffel's* 'L1+KK' disappeared into the sea after being damaged by anti-aircraft fire over the target area on 16 April. And 12 days later, on the evening of 28th, 'L1+AA' was brought down by a nightfighter. Despite this aircraft's code letters, which identified it as the machine officially assigned to the *Geschwaderkommodore*, it too was being operated on this occasion by 2. *Staffel* and flown by an all-NCO crew, only one of whom survived to be taken into British captivity.

I./LG 1 more than made up for these losses when, on 11 May, they were despatched to attack four Royal Navy destroyers that had sailed from Alexandria to intercept an Axis supply convoy reported making for Benghazi. Fourteen of the *Gruppe's* aircraft caught the warships south of Crete and quickly sank the 1920-ton *Lively*. A follow-up attack by II./LG 1 (by now returned to Eleusis) later that same afternoon was unsuccessful. But a second mission mounted by Helbig's I. *Gruppe* at dusk claimed the two 1760-ton *Javelin* class sister-ships *Kipling* and *Jackal*, although the latter did not go down until the next day. Only the fourth vessel of the quartet, *Jervis*, escaped I./LG 1's onslaught, returning to Alexandria with 630 survivors from the other three on board.

DESERT OFFENSIVE

By this time, as described earlier in this chapter, the second air offensive against Malta had come to a close and Rommel was preparing to launch the next stage of his desert advance. His plan was to outflank the British and Commonwealth forces, destroy them from the rear and then march unopposed on Cairo. Underlining the importance attached to this ambitious undertaking – and at the same time demonstrating just how far the emphasis had swung away from Malta – HQ *Luftflotte* 2 was moved from Taormina, in Sicily, to North Africa shortly before Rommel began his attack on 26 May.

The only Ju 88s providing direct support at the start of the offensive were those of 12./LG 1. Commanded since 20 March by Oberleutnant Heinrich Boecker, this *Staffel* had now been amalgamated with the Ju 87s of StG 3 to form the *Gefechstverband* 'Sigel'. But Rommel was also to benefit from the raids carried out by I. and II./LG 1 from Crete and Greece, most notably on such targets as Bir Hacheim and Tobruk. A newcomer to the North African arena at this point was I./KG 54, whose

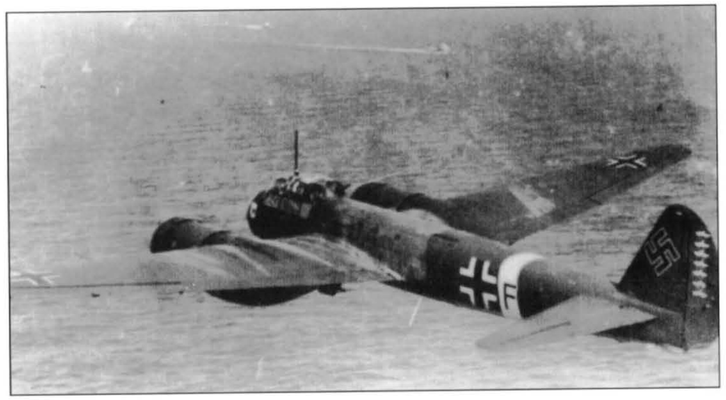
Ju 88s were transferred from Eleusis on 1 June to divide their strength between Tympakion, on Crete, and Derna, in Libya. The unit's introduction to the desert war was not without incident. It lost one of the four machines sent to bomb Bir Hacheim on this date when 'B3+AH' failed to return. The desert fortress, stubbornly held by the Free French, would finally fall ten days later after being pounded into submission by an estimated 1400 individual sorties flown against it by the Luftwaffe.

Rivulets of molten aluminium coagulate on the desert sand like the very life blood trickling from this mortally wounded Ju 88 of 6./LG 1 that was reportedly brought down by anti-aircraft fire from the Free French defenders of Bir Hacheim

Having broken through the British defences, the *Afrika Korps* advanced rapidly. And this time Rommel would not be diverted by the need to besiege Tobruk. Almost unbelievably, the town – which had held out for eight long months the previous year – would be taken on the run in just one day! Axis forces then crossed the border into Egypt, only to be brought to a halt at El Alamein at the beginning of July. Another operational stand-off ensued as both sides again sought to build up their supplies. But now, despite a doubling of the numbers of Ju 52/3m transport aircraft in the Mediterranean theatre from 150 to 300 before the month was out, it was Rommel who was very much at a disadvantage.

During this period the battle for supplies also dominated events in the central Mediterranean, where Malta, although no longer subjected to such intense air attacks, still found itself in a very precarious situation. The first two weeks of June saw six Ju 88s lost over, or close to, the island. All but one of these casualties were from the ranks of KGrs 606 and 806. The exception was KG 54's 'B3+AA', which was downed by a nightfighter late on 10 June. Although officially another *Geschwaderkommodore's* machine, 'AA' was being flown on this mission not by Oberstleutnant Walter Marienfeld himself, but by his Adjutant, Hauptmann Hans Humburg.

Three nights later, a number of coordinated commando raids were carried out on Luftwaffe airfields in Libya and on Crete. The North African raids achieved little, but a small raiding party that landed on Crete from the Greek submarine *Triton* was able to place delayed-action charges on some 20 aircraft at Heraklion. I./LG 1 reported that seven of its bombers were severely damaged, as were two Ju 88Ds of 2.(F)/124, a reconnaissance *Staffel* also currently based on the field.



1./KGr 606's '7T+FH' appears to be engaged here on routine convoy escort duty. The crew's obvious success in the more offensive anti-shipping role may be gauged from the impressive rudder scoreboard, which suggests this could be the machine flown by Leutnant Johannes Geismann. Also just visible on the nose of the aircraft is KGr 606's 'cockerel' badge, introduced by long-serving *Gruppenkommandeur* Oberstleutnant Joachim Hahn (*Hahn* being the German for cockerel), who was killed in action on 3 June 1942

These commando actions, designed to neutralise at least some of the Luftwaffe's striking power, were part and parcel of a much larger overall plan – to sail two supply convoys to Malta simultaneously from either end of the Mediterranean. The western force, code-named Operation *Harpoon* and consisting of five merchantmen and one tanker, was strongly escorted by units of the Royal Navy, including two carriers.

The vessels slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar into the western Mediterranean during the early hours of 12 June. The first opposition they faced came from Italian forces based on Sardinia. The first Luftwaffe machines to make contact with the convoy were the long-range reconnaissance Ju 88Ds of 1.(F)/122, operating out of Libya. They paid for their 'snooping' by losing two of their number, both, it is believed, to Sea Hurricanes launched from HMS *Eagle* – 'F6+HH' crashed in Algeria early on the afternoon of 13th, and 'F6+EH' came down in the sea the following morning.

By the evening of that same 14 June, the vessels were within range of the Luftwaffe's Malta-based bombers. Nine machines of KGr 606 dive-bombed the elderly carrier *Argus*, narrowly missing it. Two of the unit's Ju 88s also succumbed to Sea Hurricanes, '7T+IL' and '7T+HL' both failing to return from this mission.

The action peaked the next day. The first Ju 88s to attack were a small force from I./KG 54 that had been held back at Comiso when the bulk of the *Gruppe* transferred to Crete a fortnight earlier. Three bombs struck the 5600-ton *Chant*, an American merchantman, which slowly sank beneath the waves, while the 9308-ton US tanker *Kentucky* was disabled by a near miss. The I./KG 54 machines returned to the convoy shortly before noon. This time they damaged the 5601-ton British freighter *Burdwan*. Close on their heels came aircraft from KGr 606, who more than made up for their poor performance on the previous day by quickly sending both the *Burdwan* and the *Kentucky* to the bottom.

With another of the convoy's vessels having already been sunk by Italian torpedo-bombers, only two of the original six remained to make the final dash for Malta. This they succeeded in doing, despite one last attempt to stop them by about a dozen machines from KGr 806. Coming in at dusk, this attack was broken up by Malta-based Spitfires, who claimed two of the Ju 88s, including 'M7+FK' piloted by Oberleutnant Kurt Kehrer, the *Staffelkapitän* of 2./KGr.806

While *Harpoon* was battling its way towards Malta from the west, an even larger convoy – 11 vessels in all – had sailed from ports in the eastern Mediterranean. Officially convoy MW 11, the merchantmen – together with their cruiser and destroyer escort – were operating under the codename *Vigorous*. And the greatest perceived threat to *Vigorous* was the presence of the Luftwaffe's Ju 88s on Crete. By 14 June the ships were traversing 'Bomb Alley', the stretch of water between Crete and the North African coastline. They had been under near constant attack all day long, mainly from Ju 87s based in Libya. In the evening it was the turn of the Ju 88s.

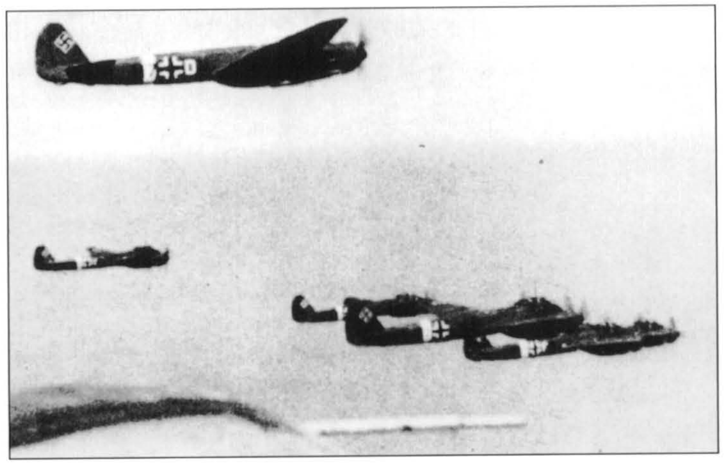
In one three-hour period alone, the crews of I. and II./LG 1, together with elements of I./KG 54, flew no fewer than seven separate attacks, totalling close on 90 individual sorties in all. Despite this maximum effort (which resulted in the loss of five bombers, with as many again damaged or written-off in crash-landings back on Crete), only one merchantman was sunk – the 6104-ton British freighter *Bhutan*.

In this well-known shot of unfortunately less than perfect quality, the predatory shape of a KG 77 machine is silhouetted against Malta's Grand Harbour. Note the large merchant vessel at the mouth of Dockyard Creek just in front of the aircraft's port wing

The intensity of the air attacks did have one other result, however. Although only halfway to Malta, the convoy's escorting warships were already running seriously low in anti-aircraft ammunition. And when, on top of that, an RAF reconnaissance Spitfire reported that heavy units of the Italian battle fleet had put to sea with the apparent intention of engaging the convoy, the decision was reluctantly taken to order the merchantmen to return to Alexandria. Between them, Operations *Harpoon/Vigorous* were to have delivered 115,000 tons of supplies to beleaguered Malta. In the event, only 15,000 tons reached the island. This was just enough to stave off an immediate crisis, but it was clear to both sides that another convoy would be needed, and needed soon.

Until that time the Ju 88s on Sicily were instructed to maintain as much pressure as possible on Malta. To help them do so, Oberstleutnant Hermann Schlüter's *Stab* KG 77, together with his II. and III. *Gruppen*, were transferred back from France at the end of June to rejoin *Kampfgruppen* 606 and 806 and I./KG 54 on Sicily. Throughout July these five *Gruppen* flew an almost unbroken succession of raids against Malta in strengths ranging from single aircraft to formations of two-dozen or more, mainly targeting the island's airfields. It cost them over 30 machines in all, plus many others damaged. Two-thirds of the casualties came from the ranks of KG 77. They included two *Staffelkapitäne* of the particularly unfortunate 7./KG 77, both of whom were brought down by Spitfires – Oberleutnant Erich Behr's '3Z+GR' failed to return from a raid on Luqa on 8 July and Oberleutnant Josef Zimmer's '3Z+JR' was shot into the sea on 27 July even before he could reach his target at Takali.

This photograph of a KGr 806 formation over open water is as grainy as the one above, but it too is of interest for on the original print it is just possible to make out the markings of the aircraft at the top of the picture – 'M7+DH'. Is this perhaps the machine flown by Leutnant Karl-Erich Ritter, the first Luftwaffe bomber lost in the historic *Pedestal* convoy battle?



By this time the first vessels of what was to be the next Malta convoy were already beginning to converge on the River Clyde in Scotland. Only too aware of the Luftwaffe's current domination of the eastern Mediterranean, and not wishing to repeat the unhappy experience of *Vigorous*, Operation *Pedestal* was a less elaborate plan calling for one large convoy, heavily escorted by units of the Royal Navy, to sail through the Straits of Gibraltar and approach Malta from the west. It consisted of 13 fast, modern merchantmen, not one of them of less than 7000 tons, and a single tanker, which together were transporting over 85,000 tons of supplies. Protection was to be provided by main covering and escorting forces composed of four carriers, two battleships, seven cruisers and no fewer than 26 destroyers.

The assemblage of an armada of this size could not escape detection for long and, to oppose it, Axis air strength on Sardinia and Sicily was increased to over 650 machines. Almost 150 of this total was made up of the seven Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* now gathered on Sicily (the five resident *Gruppen* being temporarily reinforced by I. and II./LG 1 flying in from Greece and Crete). Thus the battle lines were drawn for the last great Malta convoy action of the Mediterranean war.

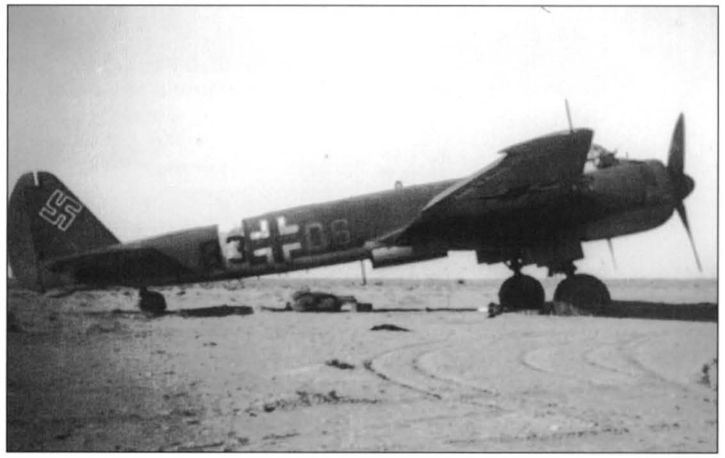
CONVOY ENGAGED

Pedestal slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar in the early hours of 10 August 1942. It did not suffer its first casualty until shortly after noon the following day, when the veteran carrier *Eagle*, which had been instrumental in the delivery of nearly 200 Spitfires to Malta over the previous five months, was torpedoed by U-73 some 85 miles north of Algiers.

The first air attack, mounted by Ju 88s, backed up by torpedo-carrying He 111s, came in just as night was falling. But neither this, nor a second assault by two-dozen machines of I. and II./LG 1 at mid-morning of the 12th, produced any results. The first did, however, see the loss of KGr 806's 'M7+DH', while the latter reportedly cost LG 1 seven machines (including one shot down in error by Italian fighters as it approached Sardinia after the mission to land and refuel).

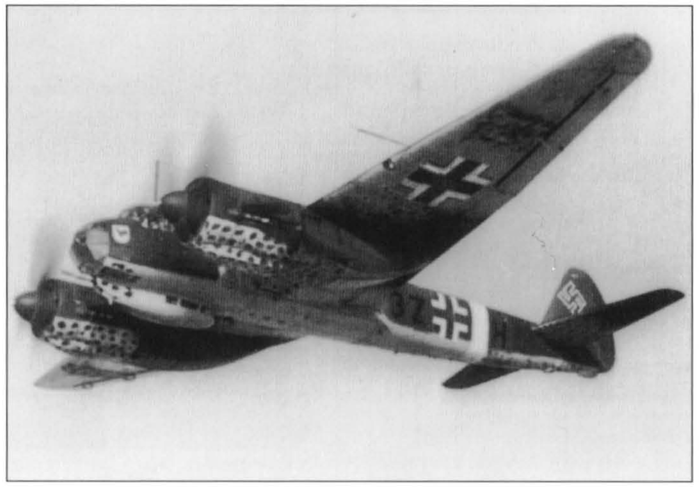
A prolonged attack by some 70 Italian and German aircraft – over half of them Ju 88s of KGs 54 and 77 – south of Sardinia in the early afternoon fared slightly better. The battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson* were both shaken by near misses, while the 7516-ton freighter *Deucalion* was damaged. But one of 8./KG 77's machines, '3Z+ES' piloted by Oberleutnant Leopold Lagauer, failed to return.

Just two weeks after *Pedestal*, on 1 September 1942, KGr 806 was redesignated to become III./KG 54 (the first III./KG 54 having been disbanded back in July 1940 at the start of the Battle of Britain!). This photograph, from a British source, of 8. *Staffel's* 'B3+DS' abandoned in the desert, was clearly taken some time later during Rommel's retreat through Libya



Another Ju 88 went down during the last air attack on 12 August. Coming in at dusk, a force of 30 machines from KGs 54, 77 and KGr 806 – again backed by torpedo-carrying Heinkels – hit the convoy hard. Already damaged, the 12,688-ton *Empire Hope* took two direct hits from a Ju 88 that turned it into a blazing inferno. The Heinkels sank another of the merchantmen and delivered the *coup de grâce* to the *Deucalion*, while two more freighters were damaged. During the night of 12/13 August the remaining ships, by now widely scattered, rounded Cape Bon. In the early hours of the morning they were savaged by Italian MTBs, which immobilised the cruiser *Manchester*, sank four of the freighters and damaged a fifth.

But it fell to Ju 88s to claim the final *Pedestal* victim when, shortly after 0800 hrs on 13 August, bombers from 3./KGr 806, led by *Staffelkapitän* Oberleutnant Wolfgang Schulte, attacked the



Also in September 1942, KGr 606 was redesignated to become the new I./KG 77 (the original I./KG 77, which never served in the Mediterranean, had been renumbered I./KG 6 at the end of August). While retaining the 'cockerel' badge, the *Gruppe's* aircraft now wore the unit codes of their new parent *Geschwader*, as may be seen in this fine flying shot of '3Z+EH'. Note also what appears to be a 20 mm MG FF cannon projecting from the ventral gondola. This weapon was used for low-level attacks on shipping, which may also account for the disruptive spotted camouflage applied to the lower surfaces of the engine nacelles and forward fuselage

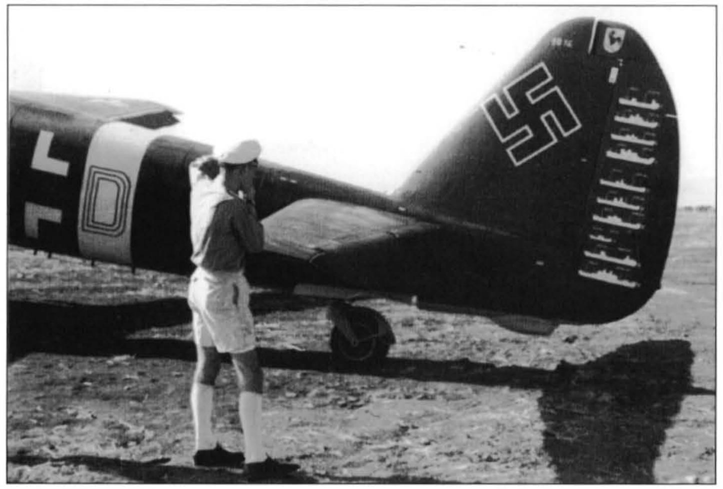
12,843-ton merchantman *Waimarama* south of Pantellaria. The largest vessel in the convoy, the *Waimarama's* main cargo – like that of the *Empire Hope* sunk the evening before – consisted of cased petrol. Struck by four bombs, the vessel erupted in a huge ball of fire and went down in just a matter of seconds.

Three more Ju 88s would be brought down during the course of the next 24 hours. Others helped to finish off two of *Pedestal's* crippled stragglers. But to all intents and purposes, the action was over. Four of the original 13 merchantmen reached Malta, bringing with them some 32,000 tons of supplies. Last of all, the tanker *Ohio* – battered, grievously wounded, its decks almost awash – was later towed into Grand Harbour. The provisions unloaded from the four freighters allowed Malta to survive, while the aviation fuel pumped from the *Ohio* enabled the island to resume its air strikes against Rommel's supply convoys just as he was preparing to launch the desert offensive that was intended to drive the British out of Egypt for good.

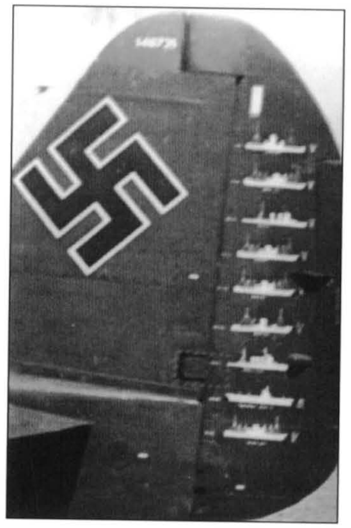
After the intense air actions fought during the course of *Pedestal* in mid-month, the operations flown against Malta during the latter half of August were something of an anti-climax. Seven Ju 88s were lost for very little in return. September remained equally quiet, with all but one of the 20 KG 54 machines reported lost or damaged throughout the Mediterranean area that month being attributed to accidental or unknown causes. The the single exception was an aircraft destroyed in an RAF bombing raid on Heraklion.

The Ju 88 units on Sicily utilised this lull to gather strength and reorganize for one last blitz on Malta. The most obvious change was the incorporation of the two hitherto semi-autonomous *Kampfgruppen* into the ranks of the established *Kampfgeschwader*, with Hauptmann Rolf Siedschlag's KGr 606 being redesignated to become the new I./KG 77 and Major Richard Linke's KGr 806 filling the long-vacant III. *Gruppe* slot in KG 54.

By the beginning of October there were seven Ju 88 *Gruppen* poised on Sicily to renew the assault on Malta – KGs 54 and 77, both now at full three-*Gruppe* establishment, plus II./LG 1 brought back after briefly returning to Crete. In total, there were close on 200 machines all concentrated on the three airfields at Gerbini, Catania and Comiso.



Now flying '3Z+DB' (note the unusual treatment of the aircraft's individual letter) with the *Gruppenstab* of I./KG 77, Leutnant Johannes Geismann takes a souvenir snapshot of his scoreboard to date. In addition to his shipping successes – nine merchantmen sunk and one damaged – note the bar denoting a single aerial kill (claimed on 4 October 1942) beneath the miniature *Gruppe* badge at the top of the rudder. Awarded the Knight's Cross on 21 December 1942, Hauptmann Geismann would end the war flying nightfighters



Another of the erstwhile KGr 606's anti-shipping experts, Leutnant Karl Heinz Greve's scoreboard also features a single aerial kill in addition to the seven merchantmen sunk, and one carrier and one (minelaying) cruiser damaged. Greve won the Knight's Cross on 7 October 1942 and would also survive the war . . .

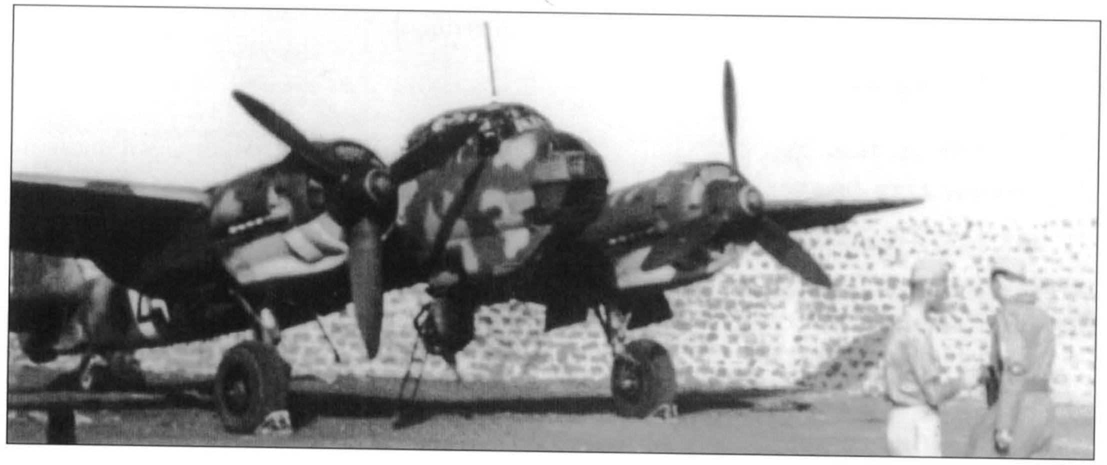
. . . unlike Hauptmann Heinrich Paepcke, the *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./KG 77 – pictured far right – who was killed in a mid-air collision with a Spitfire during a raid on Malta on 17 October 1942 (although whether in the distinctively camouflaged machine seen here is not known). Having been awarded the Knight's Cross on 5 September 1940, Hauptmann Paepcke would be honoured with posthumous Oak Leaves on 19 December 1942

FINAL MALTA BLITZ

The final all-out air offensive against Malta began on 11 October 1942, and lasted just one week. The island was no longer the soft target it had once been. Its rejuvenated defences took a heavy toll of the attacking Luftwaffe formations. Indeed, more than 30 Ju 88s were lost, either shot down or written off in crash-landings, during the week-long campaign. The most grievous losses occurred on the last day of all, 17 October, when the casualties included two highly-decorated *Gruppenkommandeure*.

Among the aircraft taking part in the morning raid on Malta on that date were seven Ju 88s of II./KG 77. Just off the coast to the southeast of Valetta, the leading machine, *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Heirich Paepcke's '3Z+AC', was involved in a head-on collision with a Spitfire. Both pilots were killed instantly (although, incredibly, the three other Luftwaffe crewmen were seen to bail out before the stricken bomber hit the water). Paepcke himself, who had won the Knight's Cross at the height of the Battle of Britain when Hajo Herrmann's predecessor as *Staffelkapitän* of 7./KG 30, had since distinguished himself at the head of II./KG 77 in the Mediterranean. His most recent success had been the sinking of a '12,000-ton transport during the Malta convoy battle of 12 August' – presumably a reference to the *Empire Hope*. Paepcke would be honoured with posthumous Oak Leaves on 19 December 1942.

A second raid shortly after midday by nearly 90 aircraft also included a formation of Ju 88s, this time eight machines of II./LG 1 led by *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Gerhard Kollewe in 'L1+YC'. Intercepted by Spitfires, the latter was shot into the sea off Valetta. Although the entire crew succeeded in bailing out, only the wireless-operator and gunner were picked up alive. Having been awarded the Knight's Cross on the eve of the invasion of Yugoslavia, Kollewe had then led his



Gruppe with great success in the Mediterranean, II./LG 1 being credited with sinking 148,000 tons of merchant shipping and two destroyers. He had been presented with the Oak Leaves just over two months earlier on 10 August 1942, the very day that *Pedestal* had entered the Straits of Gibraltar.

The deaths of these two leading Luftwaffe bomber pilots effectively wrote *finis* to the Axis air campaign against Malta. There would, of course, be further raids in the months ahead, but these would be mere pinpricks in comparison to the suffering endured by the island at the height of the major 1941 and 1942 offensives.

The desert's 'resident' long-range reconnaissance *Staffel* by mid-1942, 1.(F)/121 was of inestimable value to Rommel in the planning of his ground operations. But that ground could sometimes be treacherous, as witness the unit's 'sand-and-spinach' camouflaged '7A+BH' on its nose at Fuka I sometime in August 1942

Meanwhile, with Hitler having abandoned all plans to invade Malta from the air, every effort since had been directed towards building up Axis ground forces in North Africa in preparation for Rommel's drive on Cairo. During this period – July/August 1942 – those *Gruppen* of LG 1 based on Crete had continued to raid the eastern Mediterranean ports of Alexandra, Suez and Port Said, usually under cover of darkness, and had suffered over a dozen losses in the process. Rommel launched his last great offensive on 31 August. At first all went well, for he managed to turn the southern flank of the British front at El Alamein, but then instead of being able to advance on Cairo and Alexandria as planned, his forces suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Alam Halfa. In six days it was all over and he was forced back to his original positions.

Towards the end of August LG 1's *Gruppen* had been joined on Crete by elements of I./KG 54 and KG 77. And whereas the former were employed primarily on convoy protection duties, the other units provided the *Afrika Korps* with at least a measure of direct support during the Alam Halfa fighting. But after this, and for the next seven weeks, another lull was to descend over the Western Desert. With Rommel busy regrouping, the Ju 88s of LG 1 (together with those of KG 77) returned to their nocturnal harassment of the ports around the Nile Delta.

At this same time, however, the newly appointed commander of the British Eighth Army, a certain General Montgomery, was finalising the plans and preparations for his own El Alamein offensive. It would prove to be the turning point of the war in the west – 'The Stalingrad of the Desert', as one German historian later described it. Hitler's inability to decide whether to invade Malta or to capture Cairo had resulted in his forces' achieving neither objective. It was a fatal error.

When the Battle of El Alamein opened at 2200 hrs on 23 October to the thunder of 1000 Allied guns, it marked the beginning of the end of the war in the Mediterranean. And for the Ju 88 *Gruppen* in-theatre it heralded the start of almost 20 months of near constant retreats, growing losses and eventual withdrawal.

TWO-FRONT WAR IN AFRICA

For ten days the Battle of El Alamein hung in the balance. Axis forces at first resisted fiercely, and it was not until 3 November that the Eighth Army succeeded in breaking through Rommel's defences and advancing westwards. The veterans among the British ranks who had done it all twice before dubbed this latest offensive the 'Third Benghazi Stakes', but this time it would be different. The advance would not run out of steam just beyond Benghazi. It would continue onwards across the whole of Libya, into Tunisia, and only come to a halt with the surrender of all Axis troops in North Africa.

Rommel's long retreat was just four days old when, on 8 November 1942, Anglo-American forces stormed ashore in Morocco and Algeria. Suddenly, the whole emphasis of the air war switched to the western Mediterranean. The mass of shipping required for Operation *Torch* – the landings in Northwest Africa – had not escaped the notice of the Germans. Initially assuming that the large number of vessels converging on the Straits of Gibraltar were the makings of a vast convoy intended to reinforce Gen Montgomery's Eighth Army in Egypt, the Luftwaffe reacted with its customary speed.

Among the first, and most important, counter-measures taken – nearly a week before the actual landings occurred – was the order to transfer five anti-shipping *Kampfgruppen* down from northern Norway and Finland to the Mediterranean. Four of these units were equipped with Ju 88s, namely III./KG 26, II. and III./KG 30, and I./KG 60. The transfers themselves took anything from five to eight days. When they were completed the three latter *Gruppen* had joined KGs 54 and 77 on Sicily, while III./KG 26 had taken up residence at Grosseto, the Luftwaffe's torpedo school on the coast of Italy, 100 miles north of Rome.

Other Ju 88 *Gruppen* were sent to the Mediterranean theatre after the *Torch* landings had taken place. Evidently fearing a quick follow-up invasion of southern France, Hitler ordered his troops into previously unoccupied Vichy France on 11 November (the day Adm Darlan ordered the end of resistance in French North Africa).

Among the Luftwaffe units hastily moved from northwest Europe down into southern France were two

On 30 October 1942, at the height of the Battle of El Alamein, the crews of 1.(F)/121 took time out to celebrate the *Staffel's* 3000th operational mission. Although barely visible here, *Staffelkapitän* Hauptmann Erwin Fischer (second from the right) is already wearing the Knight's Cross, which was awarded to him on 12 April 1941. He would receive the Oak Leaves on 10 February 1943, thus becoming the first reconnaissance pilot to be so decorated. Second from left is Oberleutnant Alfons Muggenthaler, who would be awarded the Knight's Cross on 29 February 1944

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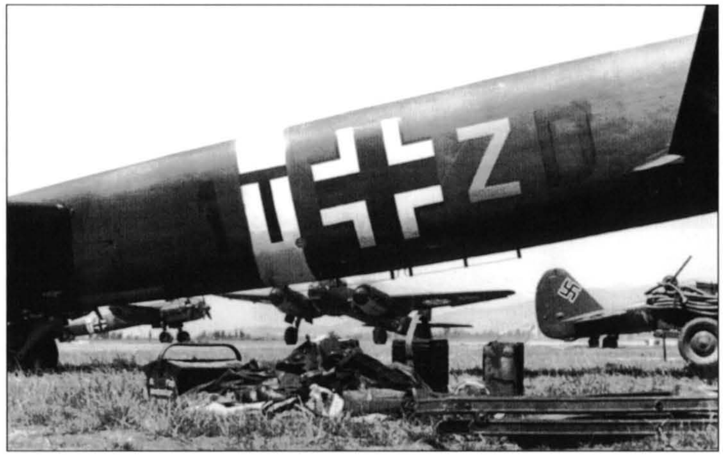


Photographs of III./KG 26 aircraft taken in 1942 are notoriously difficult to identify. In January of that year the third III./KG 26 of the war was formed from I./KG 28 (*Geschwader* code '1T'), only to be redesignated I./KG 1 in July. It was immediately replaced by a fourth III./KG 26 (the ex-KGr 506), which for some reason continued to use the '1T' markings. So are these III./KG 26 machines ('1T+ZD' in the foreground and '1T+GR' in the background to the right) aircraft of the erstwhile I./KG 28 pictured in southern France in the first half of 1942, or machines of the previous KGr 506 based in Italy at the end of that year? The latter seems to be the more likely, the only clue being the 'ram's skull' badge, similar to that earlier associated with KGr 506, which can just be made out on the nose of the machine running up its engines in the centre background

Ju 88 *Ergänzungsgruppen*, IV./KG 76 transferring from Laon-Athies to Toulouse and IV./KG 77 from Bourges to Montpellier. Incidentally, another *Ergänzungsgruppe*, IV./KG 54, had been based at Grottaglie on the heel of Italy since March 1942, carrying out training and operational patrol duties.

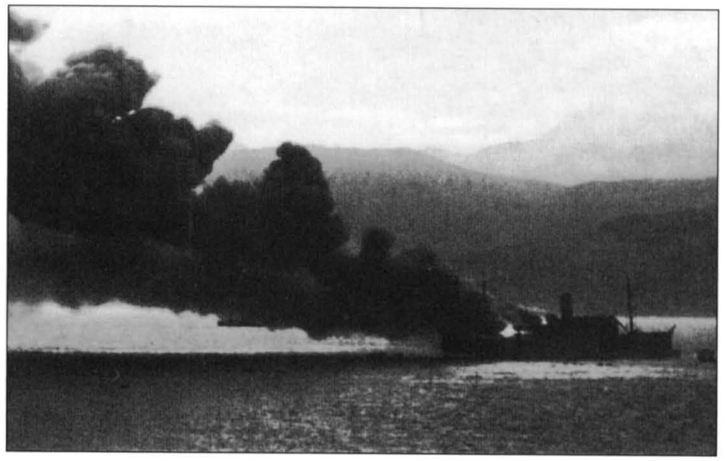
Finally, in mid-November KG 76, which had been withdrawn from the Russian front some weeks earlier, was deployed to Athens-Tatoi and to Heraklion and Tymbakion, on Crete, to bolster LG 1's strength in the eastern Mediterranean (some of this *Geschwader's Staffeln* having been temporarily transferred to Sicily).

Just how far, and how rapidly, the Luftwaffe's fortunes in the eastern Mediterranean had declined may be gauged by Operation *Stoneage*. This was a four-ship convoy that departed Alexandria for Malta on 17 November. Nearly every attack by the Cretan-based Ju 88s was broken up by the convoys' excellent aerial cover, provided by RAF fighters flying in relays from their desert airfields. Although one unidentified Junkers managed to torpedo and damage the light cruiser *Arethusa*, all four of the merchantmen reached Malta unscathed in the early hours of the 20th.

Bringing with them an adequate supply of stores and aviation spirit, *Stoneage* marked, in the words of one official historian, 'the final and effective relief of Malta'. Henceforward, at least as far as the Luftwaffe was concerned, the once hotly contested eastern Mediterranean basin would become very much a backwater, for as the retreat of the *Afrika Korps* gathered pace, so the focus of operations – both on the ground and in the air – moved ever further westwards.

On Crete, a special battle group of Ju 88s – the *Einsatzgruppe Kretal*, composed of elements from both LG 1 and KG 76 – was set up specifically to targets the Eighth Army's rear-area lines of communications and supply. Throughout the latter half of November and for much of December, machines of the *Einsatzgruppe* flew anti-shipping patrols and bombed coastal targets between Tobruk and Benghazi (Tobruk having been recaptured on 13 November and Benghazi exactly one week later). During this time a dozen or so Ju 88s were lost over Libya. Among the casualties were the *Gruppenkommandeur* of IV./LG 1, Major Erwin Schulz, whose machine was shot down over Derna on 21 November, and LG 1's *Kommodore*, Oberst Franz von Benda, who failed to return from what was described as 'a special mission to Tobruk' on 2 December.

But it was at the far western end of the Mediterranean – the scene of the *Torch* landings – where the fiercest air battles were now being fought. Eleven Ju 88s were reported missing in attacks on shipping in the Algiers area on the first two days of the invasion alone. A number of vessels were damaged in these raids, including the 9135-ton American troop transport USS *Leedstown*, which had its steering gear put out of action by an aerial torpedo on the afternoon of 8 November. After taking more torpedo and



Dawn on 12 November 1942 off Bougie and HMS *Karanja* is still blazing from the 'near miss' in her engine room

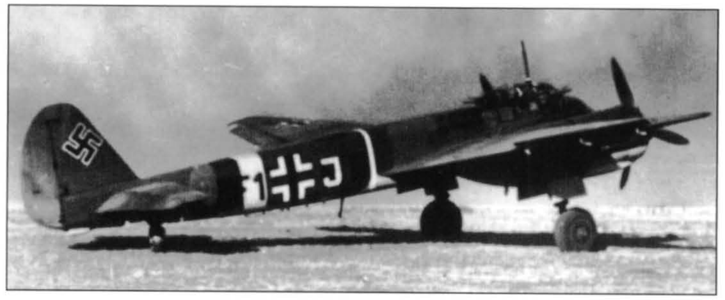
bomb hits, the vessel went down in the Bay of Algiers 24 hours later. The Royal Navy's 1300-ton sloop HMS *Ibis* was sent to the bottom north of Algiers the following day.

It was during the subsequent landings at Bougie, over 100 miles to the east of Algiers, on 11 November – where, by mischance, the assault force initially found itself devoid of effective fighter cover – that the Ju 88s scored their greatest successes. Three large troopships were sunk, the 15,225-ton *Cathay*, the 13,482-ton *Awatea* and the 9890-ton HMS *Karanja*. The captain of the latter vessel, taken over from the merchant marine a year earlier and now serving as an Infantry Landing Ship, was on the bridge when the ship was struck by at least two bombs in the early hours of 12 November. 'By God, those were close', he remarked to the officer standing beside him. Back came the classic reply, 'Yes, Sir. They are in the engine-room'.

Two days later, the 16,632-ton *Narkunda* was bombed and sunk in the Gulf of Bougie and the smaller 7479-ton *Glenfinlas* severely damaged while berthed in the harbour. By this time, however, Spitfires were operating out of nearby Djidjelli airfield (a No 242 Sqn machine had shot down 1./KG 54's 'B3+CK' during the raids of the 14th), and as the Allied fighter defences grew, so the Ju 88 units' casualty lists inevitably began to lengthen. For as well as continuing with their anti-shipping operations – for ever smaller returns, it might be added – and having to escort their own supply convoys across the Sicilian Narrows to Tunisia, the Ju 88 *Gruppen* were now conducting a sustained bombing offensive, both by day and by night, against the Allies' supply ports in northwest Africa.

Although the city and harbour of Algiers itself was to suffer numerous raids, it was the more easterly ports along the Algerian coast that received the most attention as the Ju 88s attempted to disrupt the Allied advance into Tunisia. Targets such as Bougie, Djidelli, Philippeville and Tabarka – the latter just across the Tunisian border – were all attacked regularly. But it was the port and airfield of Bône, soon to become the First Army's main forward base, which had to endure raids almost every night.

More than 30 Ju 88s were lost to direct enemy action during each of the three months from November 1942 to January 1943. This was the equivalent of one *Gruppe* per month, or an entire *Geschwader* in total. And to these figures must be added the countless other machines damaged, written-off in accidents and lost through other causes. Nor was the attrition purely material. Of even greater concern were the increasing numbers of experienced crews and unit leaders being lost. Major Kurt



Although KG 76's three *Gruppen* are known to have been based variously in Greece, Crete and Sicily, at least some elements of the *Geschwader* must have been deployed, however briefly, to North Africa, for this unfortunate machine appears to be in imminent danger of being swallowed up by what looks suspiciously like a desert sandstorm

Brand, *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./KG 60, was flying one of the two machines of this unit that failed to return from a mission on 28 November (possibly also victims of No 242 Sqn).

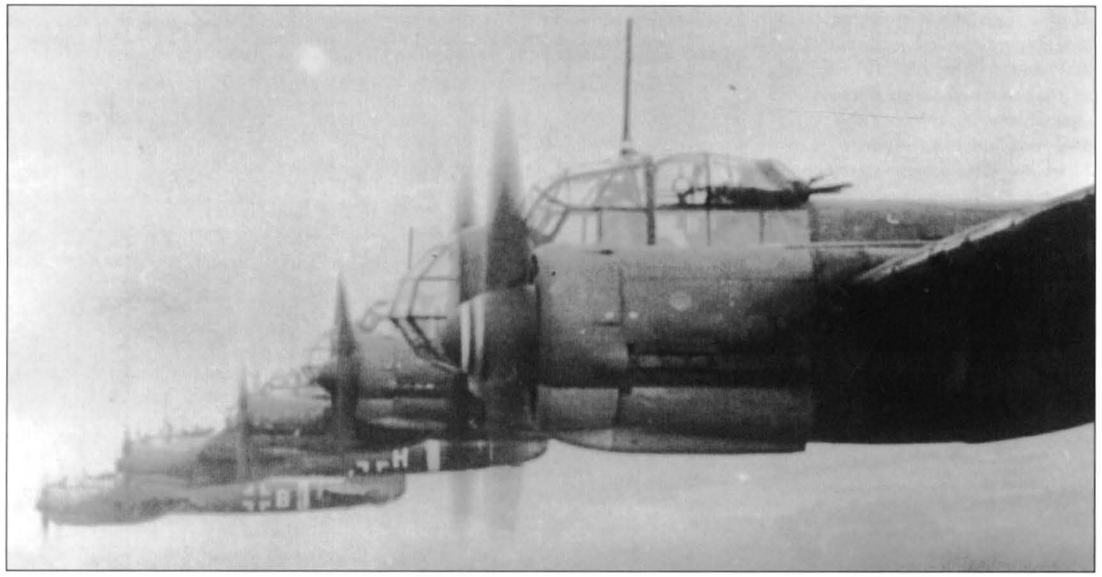
UNIT CHANGES

During the latter half of December several organisational changes took place. I./KG 54 and II. and III./KG 77 were all withdrawn from Sicily to rest and re-equip at Piacenza, in northern Italy. In their stead II./KG 76 flew in from Crete, thereby bringing to an end the short-lived *Einsatzgruppe Kreta*. II./KG 76 took up residence at Gerbini, close to Catania, where I./KG 76 had been based for the past three weeks busily flying convoy escort missions, carrying out anti-submarine patrols and transporting fuel to Tunisia. It is reported that the two I. *Gruppe* machines which collided in mid-air on 9 December were engaged in one such fuel delivery. Apart from LG 1, this left just III./KG 76 on Crete, where it would remain until transferred to Athens-Tatoi on 18 January 1943.

The new year started off well enough, with further heavy raids on Bône harbour resulting in the sinking of two merchantmen and extensive damage to three others. The only known Ju 88 loss during the first 48 hours of 1943 was 3./KG 77's '3Z+KL', shot down by P-38 Lightnings when it ventured deeper inland to attack the Americans' B-17 base at Biskra on 2 January. But it was not long before further casualties were suffered over both Algeria and Libya. A machine of I./LG 1 brought down north of Tobruk on 8 January was being flown by veteran NCO pilot Oberfeldwebel Herbert Isachsen, who survived the ditching to be awarded the Knight's Cross eight months later when in British captivity.

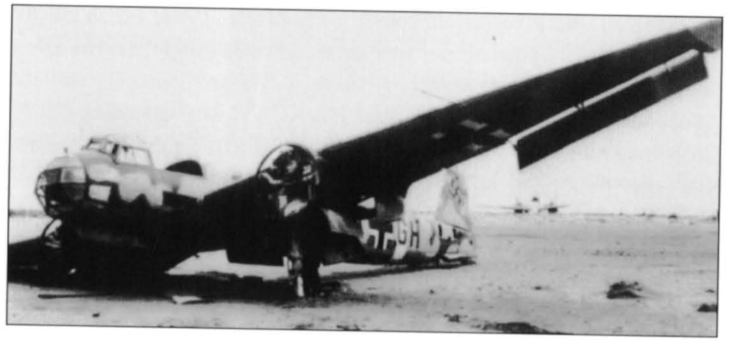
January's 'Hardest Day' was undoubtedly the 15th, when ten Ju 88s were reported missing, six of them from the ranks of I./KG 77 alone. But hardest hit in terms of unit leaders was KG 76, which had lost a *Gruppenkommandeur* and two of its *Staffelkapitäne* before the month was out. The former, III. *Gruppe's* Major Heinrich Schweickhardt, a recent Oak Leaves recipient, had failed to return to Crete after a mission on 9 January. 1./KG 76 suffered the loss of Oberleutnant Günter Haussmann nine days later, while 2./KG 76's Oberleutnant Fritz Köhler and his crew were shot down over Algiers in the early hours of 30 January.

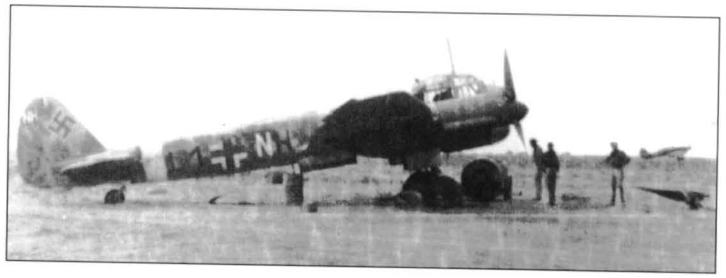
A tight formation of I./KG 77 aircraft wings its way across the Mediterranean. Note the coloured spinner rings



Above
The detritus of defeat. The see-saw nature of the fighting back and forth across the sands of Libya left numerous wrecked and abandoned aircraft in its wake. This dilapidated specimen ('7A+LH' of 1.(F)/121) has already had its tail swastika stripped by souvenir hunters . . .

Right
. . . while this Ju 88 (almost certainly another machine of 1.(F)/121, despite the absence of the *Staffel* emblem on the nose) is in even worse condition, having been cannibalised for spare parts . . .



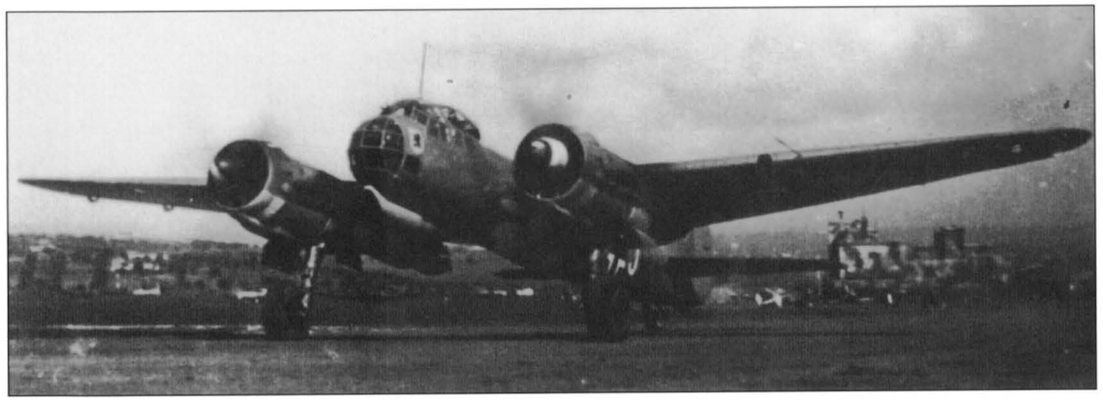


Above
. . . whereas 1./LG 1's 'L1+NH', being inspected by members of an unidentified Hurricane squadron at Gazala Landing Strip 3, appears to be intact (note the 'last two' again repeated in white on the rudder) . . .

Right
. . . and no, this is *not* the Russian steppe, but another desert landing ground. The hammer-and-sickle flag fluttering behind the sad remains of 'L1+EK' is the unofficial standard of an RAF fighter unit (possibly No 134 Sqn, which had spent two months stationed at Vaenga, in the Soviet Union, in late 1941)

By this time the Eighth Army's offensive, launched at El Alamein three months earlier, had taken it clear across Libya, and advance units had already crossed the border into southern Tunisia. Despite being attacked on two fronts, there was still fight left in the *Afrika Korps*. Rommel's forces even managed to

In March 1943 IV./LG 1 ended its long-term occupation of Salonika-Sedes in northern Greece and returned to Wiener Neustadt – although 'L1+GV' is not going anywhere until that missing starboard elevator is replaced! Note the scribble-camouflaged machine in the background to the right



Despite the wartime censor's attempt to obliterate the unit badge, the machine seen here gunning its engines prior to take-off is identifiable as 4./LG 1's 'L1+JM'. The location is either Greece or Crete, and the very fact that the aircraft is sporting a badge may date the photograph back to 1942

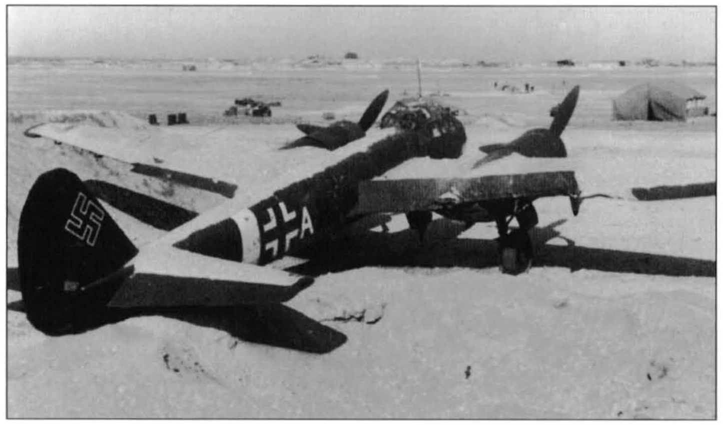
stage a brief, but bloody, counter-offensive against US troops at Kasserine during the latter half of February. The month saw a slight reduction in overall Ju 88 losses, but the casualties did include another *Gruppenkommandeur* from the luckless KG 76, Major Richard Meyer of II. *Gruppe* being brought down by P-38s on 22 February.

The end of the war in North Africa was now in sight, and this fact was reflected in the dispositions of the Mediterranean Ju 88 units as of early March 1943, which clearly showed where the final battles were expected to be fought. Of the seven *Kampfgruppen* then operational in theatre, only one – II./LG 1 – was still based on Crete. Two, II./KG 30 and III./KG 77, were operating out of Sicily, targeting mainly the Eighth Army in southern Tunisia and its lines and ports of supply in Libya. And the remaining four (III./KG 26, I. and II./KG 54 and II./KG 76) were in Sardinia, from where they were ideally situated to mount raids along the Algerian and northern Tunisian coasts and against Anglo-American forces closing in on Tunis from the west.

The two *Gruppen* based in Sicily bore the brunt of the Ju 88 combat losses in March, with their casualties accounting for more than half of the month's total. The entry in the Luftwaffe's official Order of Battle for 10 March 1943, which lists just two(!) of II./KG 30's 45 machines as being serviceable, is almost certainly a misprint. The same source also shows that III./KG 77 – recently returned to Sicily after its period of rest and re-equipment at Piacenza – had 27 serviceable aircraft (out of 43) on that date. But 16 of that number would be lost during the latter half of the month, including three (together with a machine of II./KG 30) that were brought down during a raid mounted by the two *Gruppen* along the Libyan coast on 19 March, which resulted in the bombing and sinking of the 7174-ton *Ocean Voyager* in Tripoli harbour.

During this period it is reported that several Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* also deployed small detachments to southern Tunisia, these including II./KG 30, whose aircraft operated briefly out of Gafsa, and I./KG 54, which was based on the coast at Sfax. These so-called *Kommandos* were presumably intended to provide direct tactical support to the embattled *Afrika Korps*, but it was all too little, too late. On 28 March Montgomery's Eighth Army breached the defences of the Mareth Line and began driving north towards Tunis.

With Axis forces falling back on Tunis under intense pressure from two fronts – west and south – and with the Luftwaffe doing all it could to relieve that pressure, as well as to keep the troops supplied with fuel and ammunition, it is little wonder that Ju 88 losses to enemy action escalated to well over 50 during April.



By 1943, Mediterranean Ju 88s were being subjected to ever-increasing attacks on the ground from Allied aircraft. One advantage of desert airfields was that the loose sand absorbed much of the blast from bombs. Although this near-miss right alongside 'L1+AH' has covered its uppersurfaces in a thick layer of sand, the only significant damage appears to be to the trailing edge of the Ju 88's starboard wing. Out on the runway a working party hastily fills in the crater left by the next (or previous?) bomb in the stick

Nor was it just those units based on Sardinia and Sicily that were now feeling the weight of Allied air superiority. *Gruppen* in Italy that were ostensibly still undergoing retraining and re-equipment were thrown into the fray and suffered the inevitable consequences. Elements of II./LG 1 were also moved forward from Crete to Sicily to play their part in the final act of the African drama, only to lose two crews over Tunisia (although another of the *Gruppe's* Ju 88s based on Sicily was credited with sinking the submarine HMS *Sahib* off the northeastern tip of the island on 24 April). But one of April's last casualties was yet another of KG 76's unfortunate *Gruppenkommandeure* when Hauptmann Anton Stadler, who had taken over II./KG 76 after the loss of Major Richard Meyer on 22 February, himself failed to return from a night raid on Philippeville on 28 April.

Some half-dozen further Ju 88 losses would be reported before the last Axis troops in Tunisia surrendered on 13 May and the war in Africa was finally over. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the 200+ combat losses suffered since the *Torch* landings had broken the back of the Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* in the Mediterranean, but they *were* another nail in the coffin. Prior to *Torch*, the Luftwaffe's '*Wunderbomber*' had been a mainstay of the *Blitzkrieg* in the Balkans, had played a major role in the bombing of Malta and had been the scourge of the Royal and Merchant Navies over almost the whole length and breadth of the Mediterranean. But after the loss of Tunisia the Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* became just another part of the gradual but general retreat northwards.

As Allied air power in the area grew from a position of numerical superiority to one of near total supremacy, so the Ju 88 bombers faced their final test. A test that in little more than a year would see their numbers in theatre fall from a peak of very nearly 300 machines to exactly nil!

At first glance 'L1+GH', also from 1./LG 1, may seem undamaged. But closer inspection reveals that the machine is absolutely riddled with small bullet holes, almost certainly from the machine guns of a strafing RAF fighter. Note also the oil leaking down over the protective cover of the starboard main wheel

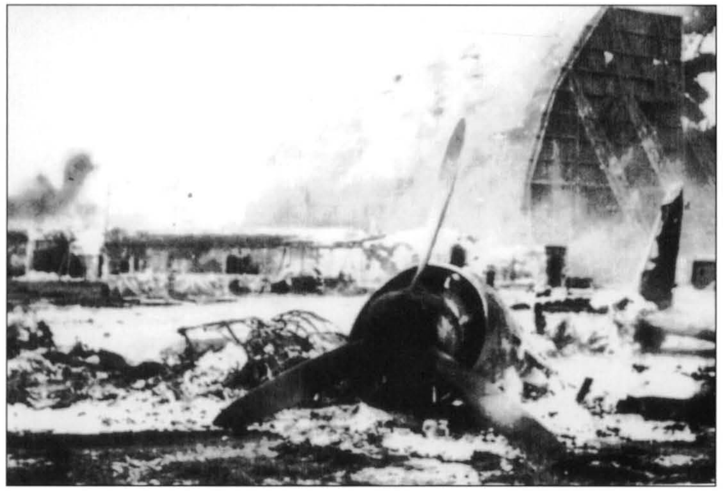
THE 'SOFT UNDERBELLY'

With all of North Africa now in their hands, the next logical step for the Allies to take would be to mount a cross-Mediterranean invasion somewhere along the 'soft underbelly' of Europe. The question for Axis leaders was where exactly would the enemy strike? Despite some elaborate subterfuges and deceptions by the Allies in an effort to persuade Hitler that landings might take place on Sardinia, in southern France or even the Aegean, the consensus of opinion in the Axis camp was that the likeliest route for the Allies to take into southern Europe would be through Italy, using Sicily as a first stepping stone.

Thus the island that had been the home of the Mediterranean Ju 88s ever since the first machines of LG 1 touched down there in December 1940 was now itself in the frontline. This fact was underscored by the heavy pounding that Sicily's airfields were given by Allied bombers from Malta and North Africa as part of the pre-invasion softening-up process.

With Sicily rapidly becoming untenable, the early summer of 1943 witnessed yet further reorganisation of the Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* in the Mediterranean. In the immediate aftermath of the Tunisian campaign, I. and II./KG 54 both returned to the Reich for re-equipment, leaving just III./KG 54 to transfer from Catania to Grottaglie in Italy. I. and III./KG 77 likewise disappeared from the order of battle, which meant that only II./KG 77 remained in Italy, based first at Foggia, before then moving to Rome-Ciampino.

To replace the four departed *Gruppen*, elements of two *Kampfgeschwader* new to the Mediterranean theatre were transferred in to Italy – I. and II./KG 1 from the Russian Front and I. and III./KG 6 from northwest Europe. III./KG 6, incidentally, was the original III./LG 1 of the 1941 desert war in Libya.



As the war moved to the northern shores of the Mediterranean so the Allied air attacks grew heavier. This is the scene of devastation after a bombing raid on Grottaglie, in Italy, with the remains of a Ju 88 of KG 54 in the foreground and evidence of a bygone age, the hangar door of the field's huge airship hangar, still standing background right

There were three other Ju 88 *Gruppen* in Italy – III./KG 30 at Viterbo and I. and II./KG 76 at Foggia and Grosseto respectively (although the latter two also deployed detachments temporarily to both Sardinia and southern France). Finally, Montpellier, in the south of France, was also the base of III./KG 26, while I./LG 1 still retained a small presence on Crete.

Nine of the eleven Ju 88 *Gruppen* currently in the Mediterranean were thus concentrated in southern and central Italy, where they were well within striking range of Sicily in readiness for the expected invasion. Yet when it came – before daybreak on 10 July – there was little they could do against the overwhelming might of the Allies' sea and air forces.

With no *Gruppe* letters visible, it is impossible to be certain whether these are machines of II./KG 77 in Italy or aircraft of either I. or III. *Gruppe* undergoing retraining back in the Reich. The neatness of the line-up, apparent disregard of attack from the air and general air of unconcern would seem to suggest the latter

One history of Operation *Husky*, as the invasion of Sicily was code-named, states that well over 2000 ships and landing craft were involved. The Allies feared losses of 15 percent during the operation but, incredibly, only 12 vessels of any size fell victim to enemy action. Two of the casualties were US Liberty ships. The 7181-ton *Timothy Pickering*, laden with drums of aviation fuel, bombs, TNT and other explosives, suffered a direct hit and two near misses from three 250-kg bombs. Its back broken, the vessel went down in the Gulf of Noto south of Syracuse.

Two bombing attacks were made on shipping off the Gela landing beaches on Sicily's southern coast during the afternoon of 10 July, which resulted in the destruction of a single LST. But a strike by 'some 30 Ju 88s' in the same area 24 hours later caught the 7176-ton *Robert Rowan*. Its cargo of ammunition began to explode and the vessel was 'abandoned forthwith'. The identity of the attackers is not certain, although machines from both I./KG 6 and III./KG 54 were in the region at the time (neither formation, however, was anywhere near the 30 strong as reported above). Each *Gruppe* suffered the loss of two aircraft, with a third from III./KG 54 crash-landing damaged back at Grottaglie. II./KG 77 also lost two of its number to Spitfires south of Syracuse on 11 July.

The Ju 88s were finding it impossible to penetrate the strong fighter umbrellas that the Allies had established above the main invasion beaches. An attempt to mount a sneak raid on shipping off Augusta shortly after dawn on 13 July by a small formation of II./KG 1 machines was broken up by Spitfires. Two crews failed to make it back to the *Gruppe's* base at San Pancrazio, on the heel of Italy. A raid by II./KG 76 under cover of darkness on 14th against vessels anchored off Syracuse fared even worse. The six aircraft it lost providing ample proof, if proof were needed, that the invaders' defences were as efficient by night as they were by day.

But a rare success was achieved by some 12 machines of III./KG 26 (together with Do 217s of III./KG 100), which took off from their bases in southern France to raid Palermo harbour, on Sicily's northern coast, during the early hours of 1 August. Considerable damage was done to the dock area and the small 2708-ton British coastal freighter *Uskside* was sunk and two US Navy minesweepers damaged.

By this stage of the Sicilian campaign 40 Allied squadrons were on the island, operating either from captured Axis airfields or newly constructed airstrips. A number of these were targeted by small groups of Ju 88s, which also continued to raid Sicily's ports and harbour by night. But the outcome of the 38-day campaign was never in any doubt. Early on the morning of 17 August, the last German troops left the island and slipped across the narrow Straits of Messina to the Italian mainland. That same night, in what can only be seen as a gesture of defiance, two waves of Ju 88s – about 60 machines in all – bombed the Tunisian port of Bizerta.

The Ju 88s' last link with Sicily had been severed. The only remaining evidence of their 32-month tenure of the island were the abandoned wrecks of 80 aircraft that the Allies found littering airfields of the Catanian Plain and beyond. Now the Germans were facing the same problem that had confronted them after the loss of Tunisia – where would the Allies strike next? This time the answer had to be Italy, but where?

INVASION OF ITALY

On 3 September, little more than a fortnight after the final evacuation of Sicily, units of the Eighth Army followed the retreating Germans across the Straits of Messina to land at Reggio di Calabria, on the very toe of Italy. The British had thus set foot back on mainland Europe on the fourth anniversary to the day of their declaring war on Germany. It may have been symbolic, but it was hardly a full-scale invasion.

Realising this, and rightly anticipating that the major Allied effort would be made higher up the boot of Italy, *Luftflotte* 2 HQ replied in kind and limited its counter-measures at Reggio to fighter-bomber activity. The command's Ju 88 strike force, concentrated in the Foggia area, was ordered to disrupt the Allies' build-up of strength by undertaking longer-range missions to the North African supply ports. Algiers had already been raided late in August, 35 aircraft attacked a coastal convoy on the night of 2/3 September and 80 bombed Bizerta four nights later.

Then, early on the morning of 8 September, a Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft reported 'large gatherings' of enemy shipping off the coast of Italy to the south of Naples. Despite heavy Allied bombing of the Foggia airfield complex during the day, the Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* managed to mount close on 150 sorties against the vessels after dark. These were their first missions in response to Operation *Avalanche*, the Allied landings at Salerno on 9 September. For much of the remainder of the month most crews made the 136-mile round trip from Foggia to attack shipping in the Gulf of Salerno at least once, and sometimes twice, a night in what has been described elsewhere as 'a level of operations greater than anything attained since those against Malta in March 1942'.

But, unsurprisingly, ships anchored offshore in the darkness proved much harder to hit than a 95-square mile island, and the Ju 88 units had little to show for their nightly endeavours other than a steady trickle of losses. In fact, their relegation to the hours of darkness was a tacit admission that the one-time *'Wunderbomber'* was now rapidly losing a lot of its gloss. The Luftwaffe had discovered that the single-engined fighter-bomber was more effective against a heavily defended mass of shipping. It was faster, smaller, more manoeuvrable and thus far less vulnerable. Furthermore, new technology in the form of radio-controlled and glider bombs was being introduced and employed by other *Kampfgruppen*.

But there was to be one last campaign in the Mediterranean where the Ju 88 was able, however briefly, to put its traditional dive-bombing abilities to good use. On 8 September – the eve of the Salerno landings – Italy had capitulated. Overnight, Germany's Axis partner had become her possible enemy. In Italy itself the situation was rapidly resolved by the Wehrmacht's taking over all the key military installations. Elsewhere, the position was less straightforward. At the entrance to the Aegean Sea, the Dodecanese – easternmost of all the Aegean island groups and close to the coast of Turkey – had long been under Italian rule. On Rhodes, the largest of the 12 islands, the German garrison managed to wrest control from a numerically superior Italian force. But on 19 September the Allies carried out landings on several of the smaller islands of the group.

The Germans reacted vigorously to this tiny, but potentially dangerous, enemy presence on their southeastern flank. Forces were despatched to the area to recapture the Dodecanese. Several Luftwaffe units were already in the region, including *Stab*/LG 1 (under new *Geschwaderkommodore* Oberst Joachim Helbig) together with parts of I./LG 1 on Crete. Other Mediterranean veterans – two *Jagdgruppen* and two *Stukagruppen* – were now deployed to Greece, with forward elements later being based on Rhodes. And to add longer-range striking power to these primarily tactical support units, two additional Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* were also despatched to Greece, II./KG 6 direct from a period of working up in France and II./KG 51 straight from operations on the eastern front.

After the small force of Spitfires that had been flown in to Cos was forced to retire, the only air cover that could be provided for the Allied troops on the islands came from long-range RAF fighters based in Cyprus (augmented for a short period by USAAF P-38s operating out of Libya). This was not always effective, and the Germans quickly established local air superiority – something they had not enjoyed in the Mediterranean theatre for a long while.

6./KG 51's '9K+BP' returns from a mission over the Dodecanese in October 1943. The unit had arrived in the Aegean directly rom ground-strafing operations on the southern sector of the Russian front, so the fixed forward-firing 20 mm MG FF cannon projecting from the machine's ventral gondola was now presumably being employed against Allied shipping

The Ju 88 *Gruppen* made full use of their new-found freedom, flying a succession of almost unopposed bombing raids against Allied positions on the various islands, concentrating principally on Cos and Leros. During the course of these they accounted for two of the six Allied destroyers lost in the Dodecanese when they sank the Royal Navy's 1370-ton *Intrepid* and Greece's 1420-ton *Queen Olga* in Leros harbour on 26 September. Five days later, also at Leros, they damaged the 1092-ton Italian destroyer *Euro* so severely that it was declared a total loss. Ironically, the *Euro* had been sunk once before – in shallow water in Tobruk harbour by *British* aircraft – before being refloated and towed to Taranto for repair!

In addition to the above successes, the Ju 88 crews participated in a number of joint operations with the Stukas of StG 3, which resulted in the sinking or damaging of many other vessels, including warships (from cruisers down to landing craft) and the small merchantmen that were trying to get supplies through to the isolated British forces holding the islands. The latter's efforts were in vain, as Cos was captured by the Germans on 3 October. Leros held out until 16 November, after which all British troops were evacuated from the other islands.

Although the German garrisons on most of the 12 Dodecanese islands remained isolated and cut off until the end of the war, they were not forgotten. Here, in December 1943, a reconnaissance Ju 88D of 2.(F)/123 probably at Tatoi, in Greece, is being prepared for a mission of a different kind – to deliver the load of Christmas trees seen on the roof of the Kübelwagen to one of the outlying islands

Ten of the twelve Dodecanese islands would remain in German hands until the very end of the war, but the Luftwaffe units that had been brought in to help take them departed again almost immediately after they had been secured. For II./KG 6 this meant a return to France to rejoin its parent *Geschwaderstab*, while II./KG 51 resumed its interrupted operations on the southern sector of the Russian front.

Meanwhile, in Italy, the US Fifth Army had broken out of its Salerno beachhead and advanced northwards, entering Naples on 1 October. With the Americans now pushing hard up the west coast of Italy and the British driving up the eastern side of the country, further withdrawals and reorganisation of the Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* in Italy became necessary. Before September was out, I. and III./KG 6 had been transferred back to France. At the same time the remnants of I. and II./KG 1, which had suffered heavy losses over Sicily and Salerno, handed their remaining Ju 88s to KGs 54 and 76 and retired to northern Italy, prior to returning to the Reich and conversion onto the He 177. III./KG 30 was also pulled out of Italy, as was III./KG 54, who, after passing its aircraft over to the incoming II./KG 54, likewise withdrew by rail to Germany for refit.

This left just the 'veteran' I. and II./KG 76 to make the move from Foggia – taken by the advancing Eighth Army on 27 September – to fields in the far north of Italy, which they shared with I. and II./KG 30 and I. and II./KG 54. These four latter *Gruppen* had returned to Italy after lengthy periods of retraining, and the young and inexperienced crews who made up the bulk of their numbers were ill prepared for the difficult operational conditions and worsening weather they now faced.

The Allies were not only pressing forward along a continuous front in mainland Italy, they had also captured Sardinia and Corsica, forcing German troops to evacuate the two islands on 19 September and 4 October, respectively. In their first operation, a raid on Ajaccio harbour on Corsica's west coast on 12 October, the tyro crews of I. and II./KG 54 were fortunate to return to base without loss after having to fly through low cloud and violent thunderstorms.

The following day the new Italian government headed by Marshal Bodoglio officially declared war on Germany. It was not this new adversary, however, but a combination of the deteriorating winter weather, poor serviceability returns and the inexperience of many of the crews that led to a marked decline in Ju 88 activity during October and November. This was not lost on Allied military intelligence, which sniffily remarked upon the 'low scale of (the enemy's) long-range bomber effort', further noting that the Ju 88 units were flying 'one sortie every two weeks per serviceable aircraft'.

Although this assessment was somewhat wide of the mark, it cannot be denied that the Mediterranean Ju 88s were no longer the force they had once been. By this stage of the campaign in Italy their primary target was the port of Naples. Despite being badly damaged by Allied bombing during the months of German occupation, heroic attempts were being made to put Naples back into service again, and it was soon to become one of the theatre's major supply ports.

Even so, the Ju 88s managed to raid Naples on only six occasions between 2 October (the day after its loss) and 26 November. Each of these six missions involved a maximum effort of up to 100 aircraft or more. But sometimes less than a third of that number actually reached their objective. On the second of these raids, for example, on 23 October, only 15 to 20 aircraft out of the 90 involved were reported over the target area. The attacks were costly too, and not only in terms of novice crews. Among the casualties on 23 October was the *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./KG 54, Hauptmann Horst Bressel, who had been decorated with the German Cross in Gold exactly two months earlier.

On their next visit to Naples, during the night of 1/2 November, several Ju 88s launched LT 350 circling torpedoes into the harbour basin. But neither during this, nor any of the three other raids before the end of the month, was any appreciable damage done to shipping in the port.

After another mission to Corsica on 24 November, flown by 119 aircraft against the harbour town of Bastia, on the island's northeastern

Pictured under a lowering sky, these aircraft of LG 1 are reportedly returning to Greece after a raid on southern Italy late in October 1943. By this time the *Geschwader's* days in the eastern Mediterranean were already numbered

A crew from II./KG 54 relax in the sun between operations at Bergamo, in northern Italy, in November 1943

coast, the Ju 88s returned one last time to Naples on the 26th. Then, six days later – and against all expectations – they carried out what was, with the possible exception of Piraeus, arguably the single most successful and devastating raid of the entire Mediterranean war!

Late in the afternoon of 2 December 1943, aircraft from all six *Gruppen* (105 machines in all) took off from their bases in northern Italy. Crossing out over the coast between Ravenna and Rimini, they flew at low level down the Adriatic. Their target was the east coast port of Bari, where reconnaissance had reported the presence of over 30 Allied merchant ships. Turning to approach the target from seaward as dusk was falling, the Ju 88s began climbing hard. In the van was a small force of pathfinders, scattering strips of *Düppel* (the Luftwaffe's equivalent of 'Window') to confuse Allied radar and dropping flares. The latter were hardly necessary, as the harbour was already ablaze with light to facilitate unloading. This complacency – or was it a calculated risk? – could hardly have occurred at a worse time.

At about 1930 hrs the first bombs and LT 350 torpedoes were released. Accounts differ as to how many aircraft actually carried out the attack – German records specify an exact 88, while one Allied estimate put the number at 'only 30'. However many they were, the havoc they wrought was enormous. Two ammunition ships were hit almost at once. The resultant explosion devastated a large part of the dockside and much of the surrounding area. The bulk fuel pipe was severed and fuel spread across the surface of the harbour. Ignited by burning aviation spirit escaping from the damaged Italian tanker *Cassala*, it quickly engulfed many of the other ships that had so far escaped the bombs.

One reference source lists 15 vessels totally destroyed (others give higher figures – anything up to 19) plus seven severely damaged. A further horror was added to the carnage already caused when it was discovered that one of the four US Liberty ships sunk, the 7177-ton *John Harvey*, had been carrying 100 tons of mustard gas bombs in its holds. In addition to the 1000+ men who perished in the raid, over 600 unwittingly inhaled the deadly gas – 83 of them would die in the weeks ahead. Although there were four USAAF Beaufighter nightfighters in the area, only two Ju 88s reportedly failed to return from the raid, the cause of their loss uncertain.

The most destructive raid during the early days of the Ju 88 in the Mediterranean had undoubtedly been that on Piraeus harbour in Greece, which had resulted in tremendous damage to shipping and port installations alike. Now it seemed as if the Ju 88 was ending its days in the area in similar dramatic and explosive fashion. For in less than a month after the attack on Bari, all six *Gruppen* that had taken part in the raid had been withdrawn from Italy. By the end of December 1943 the only Ju 88 bombers on *Luftflotte* 2's strength were the five serviceable machines of the *Geschwaderstab* KG 76. But the story was not quite over yet.

ANZIO

In the early hours of 22 January 1944 the Allies made another amphibious landing on the west coast of Italy, this time at Anzio, behind the German frontlines and only some 30 miles south of Rome. Not expecting an operation such as this to be staged in mid-winter, the Germans were taken totally by surprise. But the Luftwaffe's response was prompt and energetic. Eight *Kampfgruppen*, all but one equipped with Ju 88s, were quickly despatched to northern Italy. Four – I. and II./KG 30 and I. and II./KG 76 – were hastily recalled after having only left the area only weeks earlier. To these were added III./KG 30 and I. and III./LG 1, the latter two flying in from Greece and Crete, thereby finally bringing to a close LG 1's long association with the eastern Mediterranean. This III./LG 1 was, of course, a 'new' unit formed from I./KG 55 in August 1943.

Initially, the Ju 88 crews were directed against Allied supply shipping in an attempt to disrupt the build-up of the enemy's beachhead. But, as at Salerno, it was soon accepted that the torpedo and glider bomb-equipped units were better suited to this task. Thereafter, the Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* were restricted more and more to small-scale night harassment raids mainly against ground targets. But even these proved costly and rather ineffective. No doubt deciding that they could be better employed elsewhere, KG 30's three *Gruppen* were withdrawn from Italy in the first half of February. This left a force of about 50 serviceable machines out of the 140 that had been rushed back into northern Italy three weeks before. The serviceability returns for the four remaining *Gruppen* (I./KG 76 having been replaced by III./KG 76 in March) would hover around this same level for the final three months of their service in the Mediterranean.

Towards the close of this period they scored some minor successes in night raids on Allied lines of communications in the Cassino area and on airfields both in central Italy and on Corsica. About half their number even attacked Naples one last time in the early hours of 14 May. But these were little more than pinpricks in what was, as far as the Luftwaffe was concerned, now a secondary theatre of war. The end came with the

'F1+AT' of III./KG 76 is clearly flying over the Alps, but is it heading north or south? One source maintains that it is returning to northwest Europe to take part in January 1944's 'Little Blitz' on Britain (which is unlikely), while another claims that the bomber is *en route* from Hörsching, in Austria, to replace I. *Gruppe* in northern Italy

invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944, which resulted in all four *Gruppen* finally leaving Italy for good.

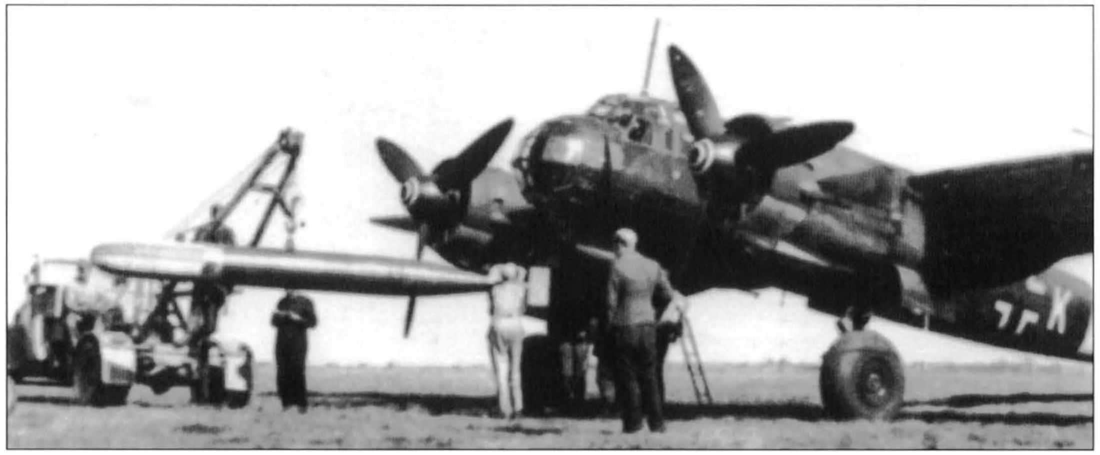
Yet there was still one other small force that had been keeping alive the anti-shipping traditions of the Mediterranean Ju 88s for the past six months and more – the torpedo-bombers of III./KG 26, based at Montpellier, in southern France, under the command of recent Knight's Cross winner Hauptmann Klaus Nocken. Having operated out of Sardinia under *Luftflotte* 2 for the first five months of 1943, KG 26's two Mediterranean *Gruppen* (I./KG 26 was equipped with He 111s) had then transferred to France, where they were placed under the control of *Luftflotte* 3 at year-end.

From its new base III./KG 26 were ideally situated to engage the many Allied convoys passing through the Straits of Gibraltar into the western Mediterranean. One such operation involving the two *Gruppen* of KG 26 had taken place shortly before sunset on 6 November 1943 when they attacked convoy KMF-25A some ten miles off the Algerian coast. Approaching in two waves, the 36 torpedo-bombers scored hits on one of the convoy escorts and two of the troopships. The 1700-ton destroyer USS *Beatty*, its keel damaged, broke in two and sank several hours later. The two transports, the 19,355-ton *Marnix van St Aldegonde* and the 9135-ton *Santa Elena*, remained afloat until the following day, allowing all personnel – including the 100 nurses aboard the *Santa Elena* – to be transferred to other vessels.

Other successes quickly followed. Only five days later, on 11 November, 17 aircraft of III./KG 26 (together with the Heinkels of I. *Gruppe* and the glider bomb-carrying Dorniers of II./KG 100) were in action against convoy KMS-31 northeast of Oran. Three merchantmen were sunk – the 5151-ton *Birchbank*, the 8587-ton *Indian Prince* and the French 7217-ton *Carlier*. A second French vessel, the 4763-ton tanker *Nivôse*, was also torpedoed and sank after colliding with another ship. As on the previous mission, two of the *Gruppe's* Ju 88s failed to return.

After a relatively quiet December, KG 26's torpedo-bombers returned to the fray on 10 January 1944 when 30 of their number attacked convoy KMS-37 north of Oran. Again for the loss of two Ju 88s, the 7178-ton freighter *Ocean Hunter* was sunk and the 7176-ton Liberty ship *Daniel Webster* severely damaged. Although the crew managed to beach it, the latter vessel was subsequently declared a total loss.

On 23 January 1944, 24 hours after the Allied landings at Anzio, the Ju 88s of III./KG 26 were despatched to attack shipping in that area. Details of the four-hour mission are sketchy, but at least six of the *Gruppe's* machines were reported lost on this date. Among those missing were two of the unit's three *Staffelkapitäne*, Hauptleute Heinrich Deubel and Josef Wiszborn of 8. and 9./KG 26, respectively.

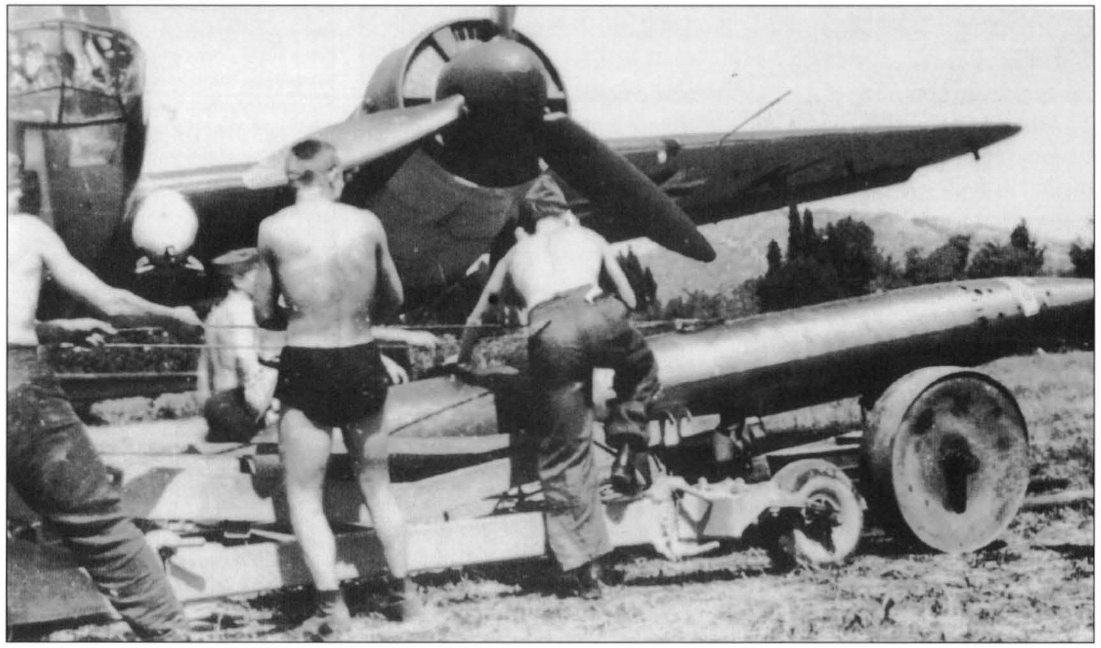


Although this aircraft of 5./KG 77 is clearly sporting a white aft fuselage band, the red and white stripes on the nose of the torpedo indicate that it is a practice weapon. This photograph was therefore probably taken at Barth, on Germany's Baltic coast (and could this machine be among the line-up pictured on page 79? Note the similar spinner rings

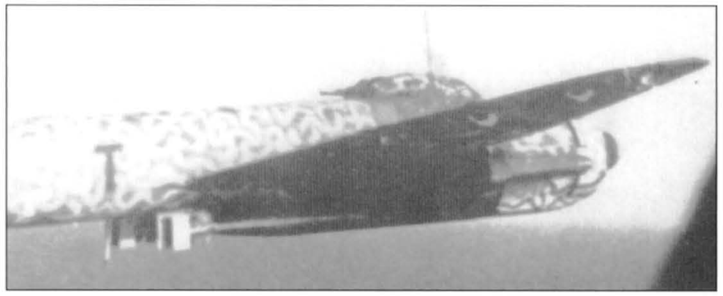
1 February saw the two *Gruppen* of KG 26 back off the Algerian coast, some 40 aircraft attacking convoy UGS-30 north of Oran and sinking the 7176-ton freighter *Edward Bates*. Intercepted by Sardinian-based Beaufighters, three Ju 88s were shot down.

For much of the remainder of February, III./KG 26's machines were engaged in individual sorties against shipping off Anzio. These were usually timed for either dawn or dusk. But then, in order to save the crews the long overwater approach flight, a forward base was set up for them at Piacenza, in northern Italy. From here they flew just two missions before the supply of torpedoes ran out, after which they were ordered to carry out raids on the beachhead itself using fragmentation bombs – something for which the aircraft were not equipped (for dive-bombing they lacked the

This, however, is the real thing. The torpedo being loaded here is a 'live one', and the background terrain suggests southern climes. III./KG 26 at Montpellier, perhaps?



necessary bombsights, and for high-level bombing there was no oxygen equipment) and for which the specialist torpedo crews had not been trained! It was with no little relief that they returned to Montpellier in late February to resume their anti-convoy operations.



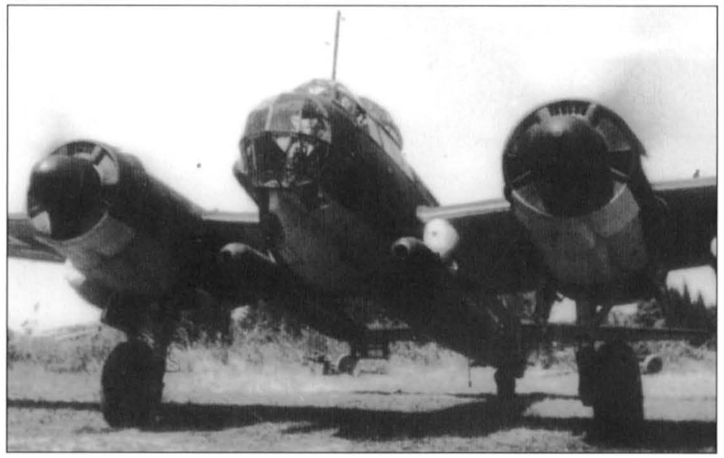
Carrying two torpedoes, 9./KG 77's '3Z+UT' flies low over the Mediterranean as it sets out from Istres and heads for the Algerian coast on 20 April 1944

But March turned out to be a barren month. The Ju 88s again fell foul of Beaufighters from Sardinia before they could reach a convoy of troopships off Algiers on the 8th. And two other attempted attacks along the Algerian coast under the cover of darkness against convoys KMS-44 on 19 March and KMS-45 ten days later both proved abortive (and costly, with four crews lost).

At the end of March, I. *Gruppe*, down to just 12 Heinkel crews, was withdrawn to re-equip and retrain on Ju 88s. Its place in the south of France was taken by I. and III./KG 77, who flew in from the Reich, where they themselves had just completed training as torpedo-bomber units.

Before dawn on 1 April some 20 Ju 88s attacked convoy UGS-36 west of Algiers, sinking the 7191-ton Liberty ship *Jared Ingersoll* but losing at least three machines (all from III./KG 26) in the process. Another 20 aircraft (a mixed force of Ju 88s and Do 217s) were despatched against the next convoy – the 66-vessel UGS-37 – during the night of 11/12 April. Their only success was a single torpedo hit, which damaged the 1400-ton destroyer-escort USS *Holder*. The warship was towed to Algiers before making its own way back to New York Navy Yard, where the damage was judged to be too severe to warrant repair and the ship decommissioned.

On the evening of 20 April approximately 50 aircraft from all three torpedo *Gruppen* (plus some Do 217s of III./KG 100) again took off from their bases in southern France. This time their target was the even larger convoy UGS-38, consisting of nearly 90 merchantmen. While still 100 miles off the Algerian coast, part of the attacking force chanced upon a smaller convoy bound from Corsica and sank the 4678-ton French freighter *El Biar*. The remainder found UGS-38 steaming east off Cape Bengut. Making full use of the gathering dusk, the Ju 88s approached from ahead in three low-level waves, torpedoing and sinking the 1630-ton destroyer USS *Lansdale* (which, somewhat ironically, had been specially equipped to detect and jam radio-controlled glider bombs), as well as the 7900-ton British merchantman *Royal Star* and the 7177-ton US Liberty ship *Paul Hamilton*. Two other freighters were damaged, and at least three warships of the strong escorting force reported near misses from one or more torpedoes.



Another 'hot' start as a fully loaded Ju 88A-17 torpedo-bomber warms up its engines prior to firing the two rocket-assisted take-off packs just visible underwing. Note also the bulged fairing to the left of the nose glazing, which housed the equipment for adjusting the torpedoes' steering gear in the air

Adorned simply with its four-letter *Stammkennzeichen* fuselage code 'PN+MT' and a 'last three' (498) on the vertical tail surfaces, this FuG 200 Hohentwiel radar-equipped Ju 88A-6/U anti-shipping machine is pictured at Aviano, in northern Italy. The backdrop is no longer provided by Sicily's Mount Etna, but by the face of the Alps. The Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* in the Mediterranean have finally run out of room to manoeuvre. There is nowhere else to go now but over those peaks back into the Reich

This was to be the last major success achieved by the torpedo-bombers. A similar mission against UGS-40 in the same area by 60+ Ju 88s on the evening of 11 May was again intercepted by RAF Beaufighters from Sardinia. Although the Ju 88 crews claimed one destroyer and seven merchantmen sunk, not a single vessel was in fact lost, while a staggering 19 aircraft – very nearly a third of the attacking force – were reported missing.

Then, late on 30 May, during an attack on UGS-42 northeast of Algiers, a torpedo struck and sank the 2873-ton British freighter *Nordeflinge*. This small steamship, on charter to the British Admiralty, was, in all probability, the very last vessel to be claimed by the Luftwaffe's Ju 88s during their three-and-a-half year Mediterranean war.

And that war was, to all intents and purposes, now effectively over. It was exactly one week after the luckless *Nordeflinge* went down that Allied forces landed in Normandy. But unlike the Ju 88 *Kampfgruppen* in northern Italy, the torpedo-bombers deployed along the French Mediterranean coast were not immediately rushed northwards. After D-Day, however, their missions did take them in that direction when they were ordered to fly the 550 miles to the Channel coast to attack shipping off the Normandy beaches. Even with a refuelling stop on the return flight, these lengthy operations put a great strain on men and machines alike.

In July KG 77 was disbanded, and when, on 15 August, the Allies invaded southern France, the remaining torpedo-bombers of KG 26 were near powerless to oppose them. As Allied troops then began to move inland, the time had finally come for III./KG 26 (and the recently arrived II./KG 26) to retire back into the Reich.

For the remaining nine months of the war the only Ju 88 presence in the Mediterranean area was provided by the reconnaissance units in Italy. And by the end even their numbers had shrunk to less than 12 serviceable machines huddled at the foot of the Alps in the far north of the country – a mere shadow of the force that had once bestrode the entire theatre.

APPENDICES

REPRESENTATIVE Ju 88 BOMBER (AND RECONNAISSANCE) STRENGTHS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE 1941-44

A) 22 APRIL 1941

X. Fliegerkorps

	Base	**Est-Serv**
1.(F)/121	Catania	15-9
2.(F)/123	Catania	14-7
Stab LG 1	Catania	1-1
II./LG 1	Catania	26-20
III./LG 1 (exc. 8. *Staffel*)	Catania	40-11
III./KG 30	Catania	27-24
Fliegerführer Afrika		
8./LG 1	Benghazi-Benina	9-4
Totals	**Bombers 103-60** **Reconnaissance 29-16**	

B) 20 SEPTEMBER 1942

***Luftflotte* 2**

	Base	**Est-Serv**
Oberbefehlshaber-Süd		
Stab AufklGr.(F) 122	Trapani	3-1
2.(F)/122	Trapani	11-8
II. Fliegerkorps (Sicily)		
1.(F)/122*	Catania	17-6
Stab KG 54	Catania	2-1
I./KG 54	Gerbini	32-14
II./ KG 54	Gerbini	26-15
III./ KG 54	Catania	31-9
Stab KG 77	Comino	2-2
I./KG 77	Catania/Comino	33-14
X. Fliegerkorps (Greece and Crete)		
2.(F)/123**	Kastelli	15-7
Stab LG 1	Heraklion	2-2
I./ LG 1	Heraklion	31-16
II./ LG 1	Heraklion	30-19
II./KG 77	Tympakion	28-13
III.KG 77	Tympakion	28-12
Totals	**Bombers 259-122** **Reconnaissance 56-27**	

*Also equipped with Bf 109
**Also equipped with Ju 86

C) 10 MARCH 1943

***Luftflotte* 2**

	Base	**Est-Serv**
II. Fliegerkorps (Sicily and Sardinia)		
Stab AufklGr (F)/122	Sardinia	2-2
1.(F)/122	Sardinia	19-5
2.(F)/122	Sardinia	20-2
III./KG 26	Villacidro	22-12
Stab KG 30	Comiso	1-1
II./KG 30	Comiso	45-21
Stab KG 54	Catania	1-1
I./KG 54	Elmas	31-19
II./KG 54	Catania	25-10
Stab KG 76	Catania	2-2
II./KG 76	Gerbini	17-12
Stab KG 77*	Piacenza	1-1
I./KG 77*	Piacenza	12-9
III./KG 77	Sicily	43-27
X. Fliegerkorps (Greece and Crete)		
2.(F)/123	Crete	20-7
Stab LG 1	Heraklion	1-1
II./ LG 1	Heraklion	30-24
Fliegerführer Afrika		
1.(F)/121	Tunis	4-4
Totals	**Bombers 231-140**	

*Re-equipping in northern Italy

D) 25 APRIL 1944

***Luftflotte* 2** (Italy)

	Base	**Serv**
2.(F)/122*	Perugia	2
1.(F)/123	Perugia	3
Stab LG 1	Ghedi	1
I./LG 1	Ghedi	14
III./LG 1	Villa Franca	21
Stab KG 76	Ronchi	0
5./KG 76	Aviano	5
III./KG 76	Villa Orba	16
Lw.Kdo.Südost (Greece)		
Komm.Gen.d.dtsch.LW in Griechenland		
Stab FAGr 4	Tatoi	1
3.(F)/33	Tatoi	4
2.(F)/123**	Tatoi	8

***Luftflotte* 3** (southern France)

	Base	**Serv**
1.(F)/33***	St Martin	3
III./KG 26	Montpellier	10
4. and 6./KG 76	Istres	3
Stab KG 77	Salon	0
I./KG 77	Orange-Caritat	11
III./KG 77	Orange-Caritat	15
Totals	**Bombers 96**	

* Also equipped with Me 410
** Also equipped with Bf 109 and Ju 188
*** Also equipped with Ju 188

COLOUR PLATES

1

Ju 88A-5 'L1+EN' of 5./LG 1, Reggio-Emilia, Italy, December 1940

Depicted during II./LG 1's initial transfer from Orléans-Bricy, in France, to Catania, on Sicily, 5. *Staffel's* 'EN' wears standard northwest European finish and is carrying two 900-litre (198 Imp gal) long-range tanks under the inboard wing sections to help it cover the lengthy final stages down the leg of Italy. Note the lack of any white recognition markings.

2

Ju 88A-5 'L1+HN' of 5./LG 1, Catania, Sicily, February 1941

It was only upon arrival at Catania that LG 1's machines were given Mediterranean theatre markings of white underwing tips and aft fuselage bands. RLM guidelines were not always adhered to, however, and many of the unit's Ju 88s – including 'HN', seen here – sported extra wide fuselage bands upon which both the individual aircraft letter ('Red H') and *Staffel* code letter ('N') were displayed. This machine is carrying two 1000-kg bombs such as were commonly used in raids on Malta.

3

Ju 88A-5 'L1+GN' of 5./LG 1, Grottaglie, Italy, April 1941

Some doubt still exists as to the colour of the Balkans theatre markings applied to a number of LG 1 aircraft during the brief Yugoslav and Greek campaigns. Were their rudders and engine cowlings/nacelles painted yellow as per official instructions, or white as some sources maintain? Photographic sources (see photo on page 21) would seem to suggest the former, as shown in this profile.

4

Ju 88A-5 'L1+XH' of 1./LG 1, Eleusis, Greece, May 1941

By the time of the invasion of Crete and LG 1's operations against Allied shipping around the island, all high-visibility markings had been removed. The accent now was on toning down the prominent white Mediterranean theatre markings by hastily overpainting them with washable black distemper.

5

Ju 88A-5 'L1+GR' of 7./LG 1, Derna, Libya, Summer 1941

8. *Staffel* was the first element of LG 1 to be transferred to Libya (in April 1941), where it came under the direct control of the local *Fliegerführer Afrika*. It was followed a month later by the rest of III. *Gruppe*. As befitted their new theatre of war, III./LG 1's machines were given a coat of overall desert tan camouflage. Note, however, that 7. *Staffel's* 'GR' has not yet had its white aft fuselage band applied.

6

Ju 88A-4 'L1+PK' of 2./LG 1, Catania, Sicily, January 1942

The overall tan finish given to many LG 1 machines was soon being broken up by disruptive patches of green, which made the scheme better suited to the barren – but not necessarily desert – regions over which the *Geschwader* operated during its frequent deployments around the Mediterranean theatre from Sicily to North Africa, Greece and Crete. However, as camouflage, it seems particularly *unsuitable* to the unit's numerous overwater missions!

7

Ju 88A-4 'L1+OU' of 10./LG 1, Salonika-Sedes, Greece, May 1942

The IV. *Gruppe* (usually 10., 11. and 12 *Staffeln*) of a *Kampfgeschwader* performed the function of an operational training unit for its parent *Stab*, and was normally based either in the Reich or in a rear area of German-occupied territory. IV./LG 1 was formed in January 1942 by redesignating the *Ergänzungsgruppe* LG 1, which had transferred from Wiener Neustadt to Salonika-Sedes some weeks earlier. In Greece, the unit not only continued with its training activities (hence the aircraft's large identification numeral on the vertical tail surfaces), but also – despite the uncompromising desert tan finish of its machines – carried out routine anti-submarine patrols over the Aegean Sea.

8

Ju 88A-4 'L1+EK' of 2./LG 1, Heraklion, Crete, Summer 1942

From their base on Crete, aircraft of I./LG 1 regularly flew south across the Mediterranean in the summer of 1942 to support Rommel's latest desert offensive. Among the targets they attacked by night was the harbour of Tobruk, hence the copious amounts of temporary black distemper covering the undersides and almost obscuring the identity of this machine (which is almost certainly 'EK' of 2. *Staffel*). Note the 500-kg *Luftmine A* parachute mine just visible under the inboard wing section.

9

Ju 88A-4 'L1+HW' of 12./LG 1, Western Desert, circa August 1942

Although several sources list Salonika as IV./LG 1's sole base throughout its entire 15-month service in the Mediterranean (from formation in January 1942 until its return to Wiener Neustadt in March 1943), other records indicate that the *Gruppe's* 12. *Staffel* operated over the Western Desert (based at Derna and Berka) for several months in mid-1942. 'HW' was probably one machine to be so deployed – why otherwise the elaborate 'scribble' camouflage over the basic desert tan finish?

10

Ju 88A-4 'L1+EH' of 1./LG 1, Aviano, Italy, February 1944

When LG 1 finally left the Aegean area in January 1944, its aircraft were at last wearing he *Wellenmuster* ('wave-pattern') camouflage scheme specifically devised and introduced for anti-shipping operations. Ironically, however, shortly after arriving in northern Italy the unit was restricted to flying missions against Allied ground forces and their lines of communications under cover of darkness, which explains the overpainting of the national insignia and aft fuselage band. Note also the exhaust shroud and *Geschwader* code 'L1' that has now been reduced to one-fifth of its earlier size.

11

Ju 88A-4/Torp '1T+ET' of 9./KG 26, Villacidro, Sardinia, April 1943

The history of III./KG 26 between 1940 and 1942 was particularly complex, even by Luftwaffe standards. Suffice it to say that during this period no fewer than three different *Gruppen* bearing the designation III./KG 26 were formed. And when a fourth, and final, III./KG 26 was brought into being in July 1942 (by redesignating KGr 506), its aircraft – for some unknown reason – initially wore the '1T' unit code of KG 28. The *Wellenmuster*-camouflaged Do17 depicted here, based on Sardinia for anti-shipping operations in the western Mediterranean, is still sporting the '1T' code a full nine months after the *Gruppe's* activation . . .

12

Ju 88A-17 '1H+AR' of 7./KG 26, Montpellier, southern France, September 1943

. . . but by the time they transferred to southern France, III./KG 26's torpedo-bombers were carrying the official wartime '1H' code of their parent *Geschwaderstab*.

13

Ju 88A-5 '4D+MT' of 9./KG 30, Catania, Sicily, April 1941

During III./KG 30's first foray to the Mediterranean – to take part in the Spring 1941 air offensive against Malta – its aircraft wore standard two-tone green European finish embellished simply with white underwing tips and narrow aft fuselage band theatre markings.

14

Ju 88A-1 '9K+JT' of 9./KG 51, Wiener Neustadt, Austria, May 19 41

In contrast to KG 30 above, KG 51's initial participation on the southern front only took it as far as Wiener Neustadt, which was to be its main base throughout the Yugoslav and Greek campaigns of April-May 1941. As such, the *Geschwader's* machines carried no white Mediterranean theatre makings, but wore instead the bright yellow nacelles and rudders that identified Luftwaffe aircraft operating over the Balkans.

15

Ju 88A-4 'B3+FK' of 2./KG 54, Gerbini, Sicily, January 1942

Withdrawn from the southern sector of the Russian front in November 1941 to take part in the renewed assault on Malta in early 1942, I./KG 54's aircraft initially wore standard European finish, to which were added the usual Mediterranean markings. Of interest here are the multi-coloured spinners favoured by KG 54 – the narrow white ring for I. *Gruppe* and the red tip indicating 2. *Staffel*. Note also the 900-litre (198 Imp gal) underwing tanks, used either for ferry purposes or for overwater missions longer than the 125-mile round trip to Malta.

16

Ju 88A-4 'B3+LH' of 1./KG 54, Derna, Libya, June 1942

After transferring from Sicily to Tympakion, on Crete, many of I./KG 54's aircraft used Derna, in Libya, as a forward landing ground during their support of Rommel's second offensive. Wearing full desert rig, 1. *Staffel's* 'LH' was clearly one of them. Note, however, that although the Ju 88 carried the correct *Staffel* identity letter 'H', the bomber's individual aircraft letter 'L' is, for some unknown reason, painted in the colour of 3. *Staffel*, yellow.

17

Ju 88A-4 'B3+AM' of 4./KG 54, Catania, Sicily, Spring 1943

Variation on a theme. II./KG 54 arrived in the Mediterranean from the central sector of the eastern front in October 1942. It spent the first seven months on Sicily, during which time crews tried to cover all eventualities by experimenting with various camouflage schemes, including that seen here on 4. *Staffel's* 'AM'. This particular effort combined the basic desert tan (for operations over North Africa) with wavy lines of green, edged here and there in white to suggest waves. This in turn made the camouflage scheme more suitable for the crews' overwater missions. Note also the dense scribble on the undersides.

18

Ju 88A-4 'B3+DS' of 8./KG 54, Foggia, Italy, September 1943

Unequivocally attired for anti-shipping operations in a variety of individual *Wellenmuster* schemes, III./KG 54's machines, based at Foggia during the late summer/early autumn of 1943, were employed over the central Mediterranean and against the

Salerno invasion fleet, before being withdrawn to Bergamo in northern Italy.

19

Ju 88A-4 'P1+HH' of 1./KG 60, Elmas, Sardinia, January 1943

I./KG 60 had a very short-lived career. Formed in September/October 1942 for service in Finland, it was transferred to Sardinia in November in the wake of the *Torch* landings. Suffering heavy losses over Algeria and Tunisia – its *Kommandeur* was among the casualties – the *Gruppe* was disbanded on 8 February 1943 and its remaining aircraft and crews divided between II. and III./KG 30.

20

Ju 88A-4 'F1+KM' of 4./KG 76, Athens-Tatoi, Greece, November 1942

Withdrawn from the Russian front and reportedly 'tropicalised' prior to transfer to the Mediterranean, most – if not all – of KG 76's machines were still wearing standard European camouflage (with white aft fuselage band added) when they arrived in Greece in mid-November 1942. Deploying to Crete, their first missions were flown in support of the *Afrika Korps* as it retreated back across Libya post-El Alamein.

21

Ju 88A-4 '3Z+EN' of 5./KG 77, Comiso, Sicily, March 1942

II. and III./KG 77 also arrived in the Mediterranean after serving on the eastern front (albeit at the very beginning of 1942, a full ten months prior to the arrival of KG 76). They too initially retained European-style camouflage, plus the obligatory white fuselage band, but darkened the undersides of their machines when participating in the night raids on Malta during the spring of 1942. Note the red (*Staffel*) and white (*Gruppe*) spinner rings.

22

Ju 88A-5 '3Z+CT' of 9./KG 77, Libya, Summer 1942

After the easing of the Luftwaffe's air assault on Malta, the two *Gruppen* of KG 77 next supported Rommel's advance on Egypt, which had begun with his breaching the Gazala Line defences in mid-June 1942. KG 77 is known to have made use of several forward landing grounds in Libya during July and August, as witness 9. *Staffel's* 'CT' in traditional desert garb, but details are sketchy. By September III./KG 77 was based on Crete and engaged in night raids on targets in the Nile Delta region.

23

Ju 88A-17 '3Z+DR' of 7./KG 77, Orange-Caritat, southern France, April 1944

KG 77's peregrinations around the Mediterranean continued during 1943 until, by the spring of 1944 – having now been converted to a specialised torpedo-bomber *Geschwader* (KG/LT) – I. and III. *Gruppen* found themselves in the south of France flying their spectacularly scribble-patterned A-17s against Allied convoys coming in through the Straits of Gibraltar. Note the jettisonable rocket pack mounted underwing to assist take-off.

24

Ju 88A-4 '7T+BH' of 1./KGr 606, Catania, Sicily, Spring 1942

One of two semi-autonomous *Kampfgruppen* transferred in to Sicily during the winter of 1941/42 to add weight to the early 1942 air offensive against Malta, KGr 606 had previously been based in France under the command of the *Fliegerführer Atlantik*. In September 1942 the *Gruppe* was redesignated as I./KG 77 to replace the original I./KG 77, which had become I./KG 6 the month before.

25

Ju 88A-4 'M7+DK' of 2./KGr 806, Catania, Sicily, Spring 1942

The second of the two *Kampfgruppen* to arrive at Catania to take part in the renewed air assault on Malta, KGr 806 came not from France, but from the northern sector of the Russian front, where it had been serving under the *Fliegerführer Ostsee* (Air Command Baltic). Both *Gruppen* had begun life as coastal units, hence their recent assignment to primarily anti-shipping commands. KGr 806 would also undergo redesignation in September 1942, becoming III./KG 54 to fill the slot left vacant since the original III./KG 54's disbandment back in July 1940.

26

Ju 88A-4 'B3+LX' of VFS Tours, Summer 1942

This machine bears the markings of 10./KG 54 (the *Gruppe's* three component *Staffeln*, 10., 11. and 12. being coded 'X', 'Y' and 'Z' respectively). But while KG 54's 'OTU' *Gruppe* is known to have been based at Grottaglie, on the heel of Italy, from March 1942 to May 1943, one source maintains that by the summer of 1942 this particular aircraft had been passed to the *Verbandsführerschule* (VFS, or Unit Commanders' School) at Tours, in France. It is unclear, however, whether the large training numerals on the tail and underwing date back to its days at Grottaglie or were applied at Tours.

27

Ju 88D '7A+KH' of 1.(F)/122, Fuka 1, Libya, August 1942

Although space has precluded much mention being made of the Ju 88D-equipped long-range reconnaissance *Staffeln* in the main text, these units performed a vital role in the Mediterranean – not least in locating, reporting and tracking Allied shipping movements. 1.(F)/122, the first *Staffel* to operate in the theatre, accompanied the early *Kampfgruppen* down the leg of Italy to take up residence at Catania in January 1941. Later in the year it would transfer to Greece and start rotating four aircraft at a time to Libya to act as Rommel's 'eyes' in the desert. By 1942 the entire *Staffel* was in North Africa, where it would remain – latterly based at Tunis – until February 1943.

28

Ju 88D '4U+EK' of 2.(F)/123, Kastelli, Crete, September 1942

A second reconnaissance *Staffel*, 2.(F)/123, had joined 1.(F)/121 at Catania by March 1941. It too would later be based in Greece, and on Crete, where it would be responsible for aerial reconnaissance of the eastern Mediterranean (with occasional deployments to North Africa) until the spring of 1944.

29

Ju 88A-6/U '5M+SO' of 6.(F)/122, Bergamo, northern Italy, July 1944

In all, at least nine Ju 88 long-range reconnaissance *Staffeln* are on record as having operated in the Mediterranean theatre at one time or another. Among the last of them was 6.(F)/122, formed in June 1944 by redesignating the existing *Wekusta* 26 (see profile 30 below). Shortly after this date, with the withdrawal of all *Kampfgruppen* from the area following the D-Day landings, the reconnaissance units represented the only Ju 88 presence in the Mediterranean – and even these were being replaced by Ju 188s. One order of battle lists just a single operational Ju 88 (a high-speed T-3) south of the Alps by war's end!

30

Ju 88D 'Q5+B' of *Wekusta* 27, Athens-Tatoi, Greece, December 1943

Another important part in the Mediterranean air war was played by the theatre's two *Wekusta* meteorological units (*Wettererkundungstaffel*, or Weather Observation *Staffel*). *Wekusta* 27 was formed in June 1943 from a cadre supplied by the then Sicilian-based *Wekusta* 26. Operating out of both Greece and Crete, *Wekusta* 27 monitored the weather in the eastern Mediterranean, while (from Sicily and Italy), *Wekusta* 26 was responsible for the central and western Mediterranean basins.

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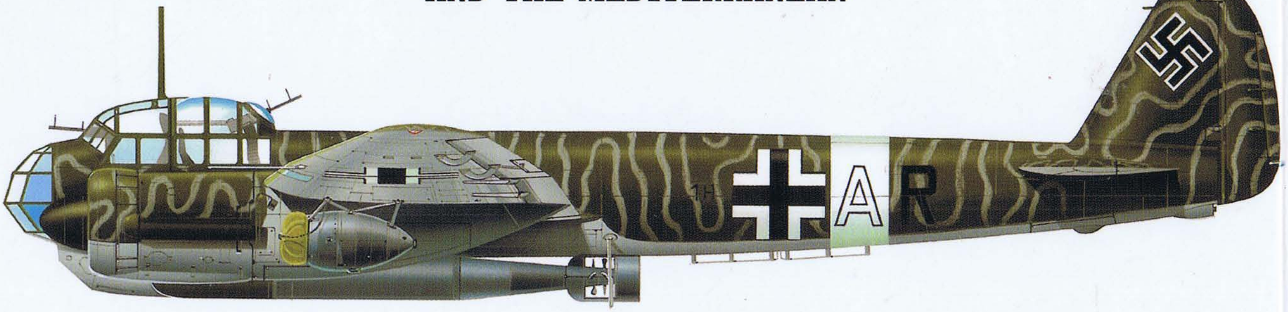

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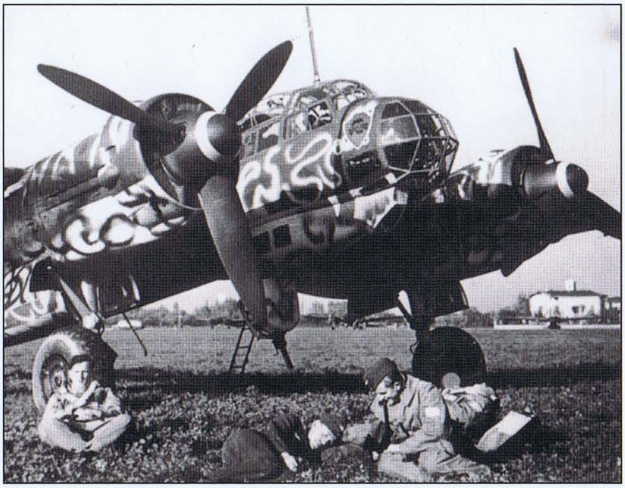

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